

Chapter 1: An Unexpected Visitor

In the drawing room of his ancient family estate, Malfoy Manor, Lucius Malfoy, respected wizarding citizen, and former servant of the Dark Lord, sat at a desk. On the desk top was a plain black diary with *T.M. Riddle* inscribed in gold across the cover.

The room was lavishly furnished, as was every room in Malfoy Manor. As the heir of dozens of generations of a wealthy pureblood family with roots in the south of France, Lucius was among the wealthiest and most influential men in the wizarding world.

This particular room was painted in a light green, with antique dark green armchairs and a polished oak desk, at which the master of the manor was currently sitting. The room was one of the smallest in Malfoy Manor, and Lucius utilized it as his personal study. On the opposite side of the room, a spotless fireplace surrounded by an ornate mantle, on top of which were small wizarding photos of Lucius's family.

Lucius pondered the small book in front of him. A House-elf had discovered it during the cleanup of the room directly underneath where he was sitting.

Due to the passing of this ridiculous Muggle Protection Act, championed by the muggle-loving blood traitors Arthur Weasley and Kendrick Perkins of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office, Ministry raids against private citizens had increased tenfold. Even a respected pureblood family was no longer safe.

For example, the Ministry had showed up unannounced at the home of Thomas Avery, an old family friend of the Malfoy's.

According to Lucius's former comrade and servant of Voldemort, the Ministry agents had burst into the house like a pack of rampaging trolls. They had forced open doors, destroyed several family heirlooms by their carelessness, and arrested Thomas after discovering several artifacts of a questionable nature, despite the fact that the majority had lain untouched on his shelves, and posed no threat to wizarding kind.

And so that was why he was sitting at this desk. The diary in front of him had belonged to his master, and from what Lucius understood, the diary was capable of controlling those who wrote in it.

Furthermore, it implanted compulsions to continue writing in the diary until the intelligence had full control over the victim.

Such a diary would be a powerful weapon. Lucius had reason to believe that the mythic Chamber of Secrets was not a myth, but a reality, and that the Monster of Slytherin was still waiting for its master to call.

Whoever was taken over by the diary would likely unleash the Monster of Slytherin on the student population, more specifically, the mudbloods and blood traitors.

And he had two potential targets. Harry Potter and Ginevra Weasley.

The points in favor of using the diary against Potter were numerous, and quite obvious. While Draco reported that he had made a truce with the Boy-Who-Lived, the boy associated with a mudblood and had the capacity to poison the Slytherins against their natural loyalty.

For Lucius believed that no matter how long it took, his master would return.

The rumors that Lord Voldemort himself had infiltrated Hogwarts indicated he was still alive in some form. If Potter was expelled for attacking students, no doubt he would be an easy target. Perhaps he would even be thrown into Azkaban, where he could be broken by the Dementors, and his exceptional power perhaps used against the Light.

The downsides were that Potter was extremely observant and intelligent, and had learned everything he knew from the Grey Maiden, Daphne Dressler. Even Lucius had to admit that the woman, who was of good breeding, was a superbly talented and skilled witch. A pity she fought with Dumbledore and the mudblood lovers. She had killed Evan Rosier in the last war, a feat that had achieved legendary status. The odds of Potter discovering the malicious nature of the diary were much higher.

The points in favor of using the diary against Arthur's only daughter were also sizable. First, if Arthur's own child was found to be attacking and killing mudbloods, he would be disgraced, and it would be pitifully easy to eradicate the Muggle Protection Act. Weasley was probably young and impressionable, and would be easily seduced by the diary's intelligence. The odds of success were greater, but the Dark Lord would not reward him for getting Ginny Weasley expelled from Hogwarts.

No, the choice was obvious.

"It will be Potter, then," Lucius said aloud to the room. Yes, he was the best choice. His master would reward him greatly if he could make this work.

"DOBBY!" Lucius bellowed for his pathetic House-elf.

There was a loud CRACK and a small creature with grey-green skin, large, protuberant green eyes, wearing a dirty pillowcase, and sporting a filthy tea cozy as a makeshift hat, appeared in a small burst of smoke. Dobby immediately began to shake with fear.

"Master Lucius...c-c-called for D-D-Dobby?" he stuttered. Lucius threw him a look of contempt.

"Yes, Dobby, I did. Fetch Draco immediately, and bring him here. Now get out of my sight!"

Dobby nodded nervously and disappeared with another loud CRACK.

A minute later, his son appeared in the room, Dobby standing in the door way, hunched over in an effort to not be seen. Lucius ignored the creature and addressed his son and heir. "Draco, I have a task for you."

Draco's grey eyes lit up with anticipation. "What is it that you wish me to do for you, father?"

He picked up the diary, and showed it to him. "This is a powerful Dark object. I will tell you nothing more, as I don't want that old coot to know, nor Severus. What I will tell you is that your task is to plant this

diary on Harry Potter the first opportunity you have. He must be entirely oblivious to its source. It features a mild compulsion that will calm his suspicions. Can you do this?"

Draco frowned. "Of course, father, but it will be difficult. Potter is extremely observant."

"I'm sure he is. The ward of Daphne Dressler would stand for no less. Consider it a test of your cunning."

"Very well, father. Are you giving me this...diary now?" Draco asked, extending a hand. Lucius slapped it away.

"No, Draco. I have means of knowing when Potter will arrive at Dressler Manor. If he does, that means they will likely be going into Diagon Alley."

"Brilliant, father. I'll start thinking of a plan."

"Yes, Draco. And get your homework done. It wouldn't be fitting for a Malfoy to cram their summer schoolwork," Lucius scolded him.

"Of course, father. I'll see you at dinner, then." Draco exited the room. Lucius smiled with pride at his son.

"Yes. Potter will be either dead or in prison if all goes to plan. I'm sure my master will approve of this." He smiled and went back to his work of repealing the Muggle Protection Act.

And just outside the doorframe, Dobby rocked back and forth, his eyes wide at what he had just heard. Harry Potter, the savior of the wizarding world, and the greatest Light wizard ever, was in trouble.

And Dobby had to help him.

Harry Potter bid his aunt goodnight with a quick hug, and the twelve-year old wizard tore up the stairs, diving onto his soft bed. He stretched out, and reached onto his bedside table for *Quidditch Through the Ages*. As he began to read, he mentally reviewed the events of his summer up to this day, July 30th.

Harry had been dreading finally coming clean to his childhood friends about how who he really was, but it turned out to be unnecessary. As Harry had suspected, labeling his Christmas gift to them of pictures from Hogwarts and some sweets as ‘Your Friend, Harry Potter,’ had all-but confirmed his real identity.

Overall, they had understood. Patricia had slugged him in the arm (for a girl, she packed a wallop), then kissed him on the cheek, leaving him dazed and confused, and Connor and Tanner had ragged on him for it, and were a bit annoyed, though that disappeared when Harry started telling them about the his year at school.

And quite an interesting year it had been. He told them about being Sorted into Slytherin, and the outcast that it made him. He told them about the troll (editing out the part about how he nearly went into shock and died; they were terrified enough by the fact that there had been a troll in a school), and the beginnings of his friendship with Hermione.

He talked a lot about his bushy-haired best friend, and Trish seemed quite inclined to meet the girl. He also told them about Tonks, and showed off his limited Metamorphic abilities. They were awed by his ability to change his eye color.

Harry could now switch to and from his natural green, dark blue, sky blue, yellow, purple (that had taken a while), and light brown. He wasn't sure if he could do red or not, and wasn't particularly inclined to try to look like the most evil wizard on the face of the earth.

After describing his holiday with the young Auror-in-training, he talked about solving the mystery of the Philosopher's Stone. The three friends were quiet as he described how the events unraveled. He described his adventure through the defenses surrounding the Stone, editing out the more disturbing parts.

When it got to his confrontation with Voldemort, Harry was forced to include surviving the Killing Curse for a second time.

Predictably, Trish had burst into tears and clung to him, while Connor and Tanner had haunted looks in their eyes. Harry had assured them that he was fine, and wasn't planning to go on any other adventures

anytime soon. Fortunately, his descriptions were just graphic enough that the three intelligent children understood the seriousness of the situation.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief at that; he didn't think he could stand to have the only kids that had ever treated him normally worshipping the ground he walked on.

Connor and Tanner had apparently been fully indoctrinated into the world of Quidditch (much to Trish's disgust), and were thrilled to hear that Harry had made the House Quidditch team, becoming the youngest Seeker in a century, no less. Harry had described his matches ad nauseum, editing out the part about nearly being killed by a 30 foot fall and a well-aimed Bludger.

After nearly a week of Harry doing all the talking, he finally got his friends to tell him about their year at the Magical Academy of Ottawa. Apparently, they'd enjoyed it greatly, and found the quality of the classes to be very high. One thing it was lacking was Dark Lords masquerading as DADA teachers and blood-thirsty trolls, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Interestingly enough, Trish mentioned that as much as she'd liked the Academy, she'd asked her parents about a future transfer to Hogwarts. Apparently, the Herbology program left much to be desired, and Pomona Sprout was a well-known expert in the Herbological community. Harry told her about Sprout, and she seemed to like what she heard.

The rest of the summer was spent playing Quidditch, reading, rehashing Harry's adventures, and learning more about the wizarding world from Daphne. More specifically, becoming more fluent in the complicated customs and traditions of the purebloods that made up the majority of Slytherin house.

Daphne had been surprised by Harry's interest, but supportive of his latest research project. As a pureblood herself, she was aware of some of the more basic customs. She also had a collection of books on the subject in the Dressler family library, which she had retrieved by one of the house-elves. Harry had read all about the 'dances,' or ancient traditions which involved elaborate ceremonies, symbolic gifts

and important dates, and were used for truces, rivalries, and other types of family relationships.

They were mostly obsolescent, but when they were used, they received complete and total respect, and were as reliable as Unbreakable Bonds. In addition, he had read about the common practice of arranged marriages. He wondered just how many of his classmates had been betrothed since birth.

They differed from the Muggle variety, because they required a Compatibility Spell, an old form of magic which determined whether or not a marriage was feasible for two partners. The marriages didn't always end up well, but they produced far more content couples than not. It was the sole reason why there were so many fewer divorces and estrangements in the wizarding world. Overall, Harry found a number of things that he had overheard in various conversations the previous year to suddenly make quite a bit more sense.

Harry's birthday was, without question, his best ever. Daphne threw a massive party, and while he was expecting a day of celebrating with his three childhood friends, what he *hadn't* expected was to be awoken the morning of July 31st by a rather large bucket load of frigid water. He was especially not expecting the bucket to be held by a beaming Hermione and giggling Tonks, while Trish, Connor, and Tanner rolled around on the floor laughing as Harry rummaged around for his wand to hex his two friends.

His wand that Daphne was currently twirling in her fingers, an evil grin on her face. Harry settled for leaping off the bed, and, still soaking wet and in his pajamas, chasing Hermione and Tonks around the House, running circles around an amused looking Andromeda.

Hermione escaped his wrath, but Tonks ended up tripping over a rug and crashing to the floor. Harry proceeded to jump on the old girl and tickle her mercilessly while Hermione cheered him on. When Tonks surrendered, he proceeded to pull Hermione into a bone-crushing embrace, which the bushy-haired girl returned just as fiercely. It had the added benefit of making the resident know-it-all of Gryffindor soaking wet, which she yelled at him for as he smirked.

The rest of Harry's day wasn't quite as exciting, though it was certainly enjoyable. As expected, Hermione and Trish hit it off, and disappeared entirely for several hours, though Harry saw Trish carrying an armload of Herbology texts with her into the room where the two girls were talking. Harry finally stuck his head in and asked them if they'd like to watch the Children-Parents Quidditch match.

It was basically Harry, Tonks, Tanner, and Connor against Daphne (who was quite good on a broom, though she didn't have the same love of flying as her adopted son), Joseph Toland, who played Quidditch for Hufflepuff, Marie Roberts, who played Quidditch at Beaxbatons, and Samuel Dowling, who could handle a broom, though he didn't have the experience of his teammates. Andromeda flat out refused to participate.

With only four players on both teams, they settled to use two chasers, a seeker, and a keeper a piece. Harry and Marie searched for the Snitch, while Daphne and Toland opposed Tonks and Tanner in the Chaser role. The Keepers were Dowling and Connor. The game was fun, if only because they weren't really playing for anything else but enjoyment of the game. The Chasers scored with reckless abandon, while Harry flew rings around the more experienced Roberts. Hermione and Trish cheered on and watched safely from the ground. When it was over (Harry finally found and caught the Snitch, they had been playing for hours, and the final score was 490-560 in favor of the children (and Tonks).

Predictably, Harry's presents comprised primarily of books, though Hermione shocked him by getting a Broomstick Servicing Kit (Well, it *did* contain a book, but still). He thanked Hermione, and reminded himself to embark on a long-overdue cleanup of the Nimbus and Cleansweep 6.

Harry thanked his friends for coming, and Tonks, as agreed upon by the Grangers, flooed back to England with Hermione. As he was cleaning up and happily reflecting on this day, he realized he hadn't gotten a gift from Daphne. Puzzled, he turned around to ask her, and she had it in her hand. She slowly pushed it into his and turned away slowly, the pain evident in her eyes.

Before Harry even opened it, he knew that it was something from his mother. The pain and grief that he had seen in her eyes only showed when it involved Lily. A brief surge of anger flashed through Harry's mind. He *hated* Voldemort for doing this to them.

The gift itself was delicately placed inside a blue velvet box. It was a necklace, with a plain gold pendant on which was inscribed, '*To our only son*' – *L&J Potter*. Harry froze as he stared at it, then turned to look at his guardian, who had tears streaking down her face.

"I found that...I found that in my vault. I had a chance to go...go through it a few weeks before you came home. L-L-Lily and James must have left it for me...to give to you...I'm sorry I didn't find it sooner..." she broke off, and took a deep breath, trying to compose herself. Harry now understood why she had waited until everyone else had left. She did *not* like to break down like this in public.

Harry's throat was dry. He moved his mouth, but couldn't think of anything that wouldn't sound pathetic. Daphne nodded in understanding, and opened her arms to him. He walked over into his aunt's embrace and squeezed her tightly.

They stayed there for what seemed like hours, both trying to overcome the despair and pain of loss.

Two days after his birthday, Harry entered his room to a rather unusual sight. A nervous looking house-elf dressed in a dirty and tattered pillowcase and wearing a filthy tea cozy on his head was standing next to his bed. Harry stared for a long moment, then closed the door.

"Um...Hello. What can I do for you?" Harry asked, rather baffled.

"...Master asked if he could do something for *me*...Dobby is not worthy of such respect...Dobby is only a lowly house-elf...Harry Potter is a great wizard..." the small creature mumbled.

"Dobby? Is that your name?" Harry asked.

"Yes sir," Dobby replied nervously. "Dobby has come to warn Harry Potter, but Dobby cannot say why...but Dobby *must* say why!...Dobby is going to be in great pain tomorrow, Dobby knows..."

Harry thought about what he had just heard. He knew that it wasn't unusual for house-elves to punish themselves when they failed their masters, though this one seemed to be taking it to an extreme. "Very well. Does your master have a message for you?" Harry asked.

"No...not master...master is bad, Dark Wizard...NO! BAD DOBBY! BAD DOBBY!" the creature squeaked. It ran over and began banging its head on Harry's bed.

"Stop that!" Harry snapped. "I know that when a house-elf visits another wizarding household, they are required to obey the rules of that household. And the first rule of this home is that House-elves must not punish themselves."

Harry had seen house-elves before, both at Hogwarts and at Dressler Manor. But this poor thing looked like it was a wee bit wrong in the head. Harry wondered who the master was, but knew better than to ask. Dobby was obviously fighting himself already. Best leave it as it was.

"...Harry Potter is kind wizard...far too kind to Dobby..." Dobby murmured.

"Well, you seem to have quite a high opinion of me, Dobby," Harry observed. "Any reason why?"

"Master does not know?...Master Harry Potter defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, sir...before he did, we house-elves we treated like vermin!...of course, Dobby is still treated like vermin, sir." The house-elf froze in mid sentence and began to run at the wall. Harry grabbed him by the back of his pillowcase.

"Dobby, what did I say about punishing yourself?" Harry said sternly. He didn't want to scare the creature, but if he was going to get any information out of Dobby, he needed to get it now. He figured that Dobby might not be so forthcoming with Daphne in the room. "Now, what is you wanted to tell me?"

"There is a plot sir...a deadly plot at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...a plot that involves Harry Potter...bad things happening to Harry Potter." The elf seemed to be speaking as if no one else was in the room. "Dobby must warn Harry Potter...*Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts!*" Harry stared.

"Dobby, I can handle myself. And I'm not going to abandon my best friend. By the way, have you been tampering with the wards?" Harry asked on a whim. Daphne had been baffled by the unauthorized anti-owl wards that kept springing up over the summer, but she'd been able to remove them.

"...Dobby is sorry, Harry Potter sir. Dobby only felt that if Harry Potter sir thought that he had no friends he would not go back...Dobby was only doing it for Master Harry Potter's own safety...Promise Dobby that Harry Potter will not go back to Hogwarts..." the house-elf pleaded.

"I can't do that, Dobby. And if you try to stop me, I *will* call Daphne in here. I appreciate you trying to help, but really, I can take care of myself."

"...Master Harry Potter doesn't know...oh, bad Dobby...Please sir, please do not-"

There was a banging on the door. "*Harry?*" Daphne called.

"Dobby...?" Harry began. The elf shook his head sadly. "Dobby must go!" A with a loud CRACK, he disappeared. The pounding got louder.

"Harry, let me in *now!*" Daphne demanded. There was a tremor of nervousness in her voice. Harry unlocked the door and opened it. Daphne burst through it.

"Sorry, Daph. I just had an...interesting visitor..."

"What? What do you mean?" Daphne asked.

"A house-elf. The same one that's been trying to block out our mail. He was talking about some dangerous happening at Hogwarts...he

didn't want me to go back...he said his master were Dark Wizards, then tried to punish himself."

Daphne frowned worriedly. "Would you mind if I used Legillimacy to get the whole context?" Harry shook his head and looked his aunt in the eyes.

After about a minute, Daphne broke the eye contact. "Interesting. You seem to have some primitive mental defenses, Harry, took me a little while to get through, and your mind *trusts* me. That's not a bad thing, by the way. As for our visitor, I understand why you didn't want me there; the poor thing was already scared to death. What he could mean is a different matter..."

"You're not going to forbid me to go to Hogwarts, right?" Harry asked a bit nervously. Daphne blinked.

"Of course not. You're as safe there as you'll ever be. Just try not to get in the way of as many trolls or possessed teachers." She said this lightly, but there was an undertone of seriousness.

"Okay. Well, I'll see you in the morning, Daphne."

Unfortunately, soon after Harry's birthday, his three friends left to attend the Magical Academy of Ottawa, which started several weeks before Hogwarts did. Harry said goodbye to his friends and was then left alone with Daphne. He used the opportunity to get the rest of his homework done, and exchanged a few owls with Hermione. She apparently hadn't told her parents much about her school year, especially the part about how she was nearly murdered. Harry sympathized with his friend, and hoped that the whole thing wouldn't blow up in her face.

However, the next day, it was Harry's turn to regret not telling his aunt about certain things.

He came down to breakfast and ate. Daphne was reading the paper, and wasn't saying a word. Puzzled, he got up to leave, but as he did so...

“Harry, we need to have a talk. *Now.*”

Harry swallowed, and followed his guardian into the sitting room. She gestured for him to sit, and then began pacing around, staring at the floor. She stopped and looked up at him. “Harry, why didn’t you tell me about how awful Snape was treating you? He was using Legillimacy, by the way, which is illegal.”

“Um...what exactly to you mean, Daph...” Harry said nervously, though he knew exactly what she wanted to know. How she found out was another matter. He had been afraid of this. He loved his aunt to death, but if she came up to Hogwarts and hexed everyone that so much as glared at Harry, he wouldn’t make many friends that way either.

Her expression softened considerably. “You know what I mean, Harry,” she said in a soft, loving voice full of sadness. “You shouldn’t have had to go through that. Snape’s behavior was ridiculous, and while I’ve seen Hogwarts students act that way before, it’s still unacceptable. I’m amazed you got through it so well.”

“I’m sorry, Daphne. You have so much on your mind, I didn’t want to worry you. And it’s well...kind of embarrassing.”

“Harry, you are my life. You are the reason I get up in the morning, the reason I keep living and breathing. I might have given up long ago if it wasn’t for you.” She paused, and came over, squatting down next to the chair he was sitting in. She cupped his chin, and turned his face to hers. “And you are the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Harry. I’m *a/ways* here for you. Please, *please* don’t forget that.”

“Daph, I...I did some things I’m not proud of...” Harry said nervously.

She nodded. “Go on.”

“Well, I kind of threatened Weasley and Malfoy on a...well, a consistent basis. They were just making me so angry and miserable and I...” He couldn’t speak anymore because Daphne had pulled him into a hug.

“And you know what, Harry? I’m proud of you. I’m not proud of you for threatening them, though I’m glad you stood up for yourself. That’s a skill you need to have, especially in Slytherin. But I’m proud that you didn’t hex them beyond all recognition. Because I would have.”

“Well, I hexed Malfoy a few times...after he attacked me, of course. And I slugged Weasley once, for being an arse. You know all about the Leaving Feast fiasco.”

“I do, and it sounds like he deserved it, though it would be better of you to just ignore him. You and Hermione know you are better than him, and that’s what matters. I *do* wish you had told me you were being bombarded by Stinging Hexes, but attacking unprovoked won’t win you points with anyone. On the other hand, given your situation, it’s perfectly okay to fight back. Just don’t overdo it, okay? Trust your gut instincts, Harry, they won’t steer you wrong.”

She pulled him into another embrace. “I love you Harry.”

“I love you too, Daph,” Harry mumbled into his aunt’s robes.

Chapter 2: Diagon Alley

With his friends gone, Daphne found no reason to remain in Claw's Clan for the remainder of the summer. They would need to go to Diagon Alley anyway, so they packed what they would need and took the broomstick portkey to Dressler Manor. As always, the house-elves were thrilled to see them.

Harry finished up his homework, owling back and forth with Hermione as usual. What did break the monotony (as always), was Nymphadora Tonks.

She was far more excited about Harry's potential as a Metamorphmagus than he was, as he'd failed to change anything but his eye color. That wasn't going to stop Tonks, however. The girl came over whenever she could to work on it with him. He'd read and re-read Tonks' present three times, but seemed to have hit a wall.

Tonks fully intended to smash through that wall, no matter how long it took. It was plainly obvious she hadn't been lying when she spoke of how lonely she was having an ability that no one else had.

Daphne had finally managed to track down where Harry's latent talent had come from. There were two Metamorphmagi in the Potter line, both of them women who had married a Potter, Helena Garland Potter, six generations before Harry, and Alicia Walker Potter, eight generations back. Daphne could find no other lineage of Metamorphmagi with the resources she had, and the Evans family was purely Muggle as far back as she could find (10 generations).

Harry had passed on that information, and asked Tonks how it was possible for that gene to have been passed onto him.

She grinned evilly. "Well Harry, when a man and woman love each other very much--"

"TONKS! I DIDN'T MEAN *THAT*!"

"I know you didn't Harry. Nonetheless, I'm somewhat surprised that you stopped me so soon...unless you know about this *already*? How would that be, *Harry*?"

“TONKS!” Harry yelled loudly, turning beet red. “STOP IT! PLEASE!”

And the nineteen-year old (her birthday was June 22nd) proceeded to burst into hysterical laughter which carried on nonstop for about five minutes, at the end of which she was gasping for breath. Harry glared at her.

“Oh, it’s so easy, Harry. That’s why I love you, ickle brother.” Harry scowled at her.

“Are you capable of speech, ickle Harrikins? (A/N: I’m evil, I know) Or has the direction of our previous conversation embarrassed little, innocent, naïve little Harry Potter? So where was I...right, so when a man and a woman love each other very much-“

“TONKS!” he shouted yet again. “*Please* stop!” he pleaded.

“But when you and Hermione take the next step-“

“NYMPHADORA!”

“*What did you just call me?*” Tonks hissed.

“Nym-pha-dor-a, *Nymmy*,” he replied smartly. *Anything* to get off where that conversation was going. And the most frustrating thing was that Tonks was fully aware that he didn’t have any feelings of the sort for his best friend. But it’s not like that had ever stopped her. She was *Tonks* after all.

Currently, she was fixing him with a calculating glare.

“Oh you *do* have guts.” And with that, she lunged at him, pinning him to the floor and tickling him mercilessly. Daphne walked in on them, chuckled quietly, shaking her head, and left Tonks to her tormenting.

Harry finally began to make the day before they were to leave for Diagon Alley. He managed to make his hair color much lighter, a kind of muddy brown, though he wasn’t able to change it back immediately. Tonks helped that by making her own hair the same jet-black color. Needless to say, she was thrilled by the progress, and had tackled

him into a hug in congratulations. He had to admit he loved seeing his 'big sister' so happy.

Harry's self-education in the history and customs of pureblood families continued as well. He had been making an effort to read up on the most famous families.

Surprisingly, the Potters were on that short list. They traced back to about one hundred years after the Founding of Hogwarts, and had a rather fascinating history. Many were involved in various wizarding wars, and one, Francis Potter, helped negotiate the end of a violent goblin rebellion in the 14th century.

Another family of note was Tonks' family, the Blacks. They appeared to have been on the side of the Light for many generations, indeed, Percival Regent Black had been killed in France fighting against the Dark Lord Tarontine during the Napoleonic wars.

However, since then, the family had a reputation of churning out pureblood supremacists. The book had stopped before two generations before the current one, but between a man who tried to make Muggle hunting legal and the most unpopular Headmaster in Hogwarts history who was reprimanded for his treatment of Muggleborns, Phineas Nigelus, Harry could figure out where Bellatrix Black Lestrage came from.

The Malfoys were up there, though they had lived in France under the surname "Malfoi" until the French Revolution. In addition, Harry founds the Notts and the Prewetts, Molly Weasley's family, among those he recognized.

Harry made arrangements to meet Hermione in Diagon Alley, and Daphne and he set off on Tuesday, August 15th. Daphne flooed without a problem, and was cleaning her robes when Harry came flying headfirst out of the fireplace. Daphne caught him with an Immobilizing Charm before he went headfirst into a table. They hurried out of the Leaky Cauldron before anyone could comment on Harry's presence.

As they passed Flourish and Blotts on the way to the Apothecary, they spotted a sign that made of look of disgust pass Daphne's face.

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"Something tells me you don't think much of this guy, Daphne."

"How observant, Harry. Yes, this man is a pompous fraud. He was a first year in my fourth year, and he had about as much magical prowess as a hag. I've read some of his so-called "Legendary Adventures" and I had to force myself not to set the book on fire. The only thing that idiot is good at was good at was self-image. I hate him because he makes a mockery out of people like me and the Aurors. Brave, hard-working men and women who risk their lives to save others. Lockhart's a coward. There's a reason he was in Slytherin."

"He was a Slytherin?"

"Of course. I guarantee if you asked him, he'd say Gryffindor, but he was a Slytherin. He's deceptive, deceitful, and a shameless liar. He's also ambitious as hell. And he was *still* a disgrace to that House. Always thought he was better than everyone else, not because of blood, which is accepted in Slytherin, but simply because he was smarter and more skilled. Which he was neither. I'm not even sure why people find him attractive," Daphne added.

"Well, you are the Grey *Maiden*, after all. You had to get that nickname somehow."

"Who told you that?" she asked, as they neared the Apothecary.

"Tonks. She told me the whole story. About the McCourns and all," Harry admitted. He really didn't like to think about that. He knew that Daphne had been in a war, and it was kill or be killed, but the cold-

blooded manner in which some of her actions had been executed gave him pause.

Daphne's eyes clouded over with some unknown emotion. "Does that bother you, Harry? That I did those things?"

Harry decided he might as well be honest. Even if she didn't mean to, Daphne was a rather sensitive Legillimens, and could detect a nervous lie. "A bit. I dunno, it just doesn't seem like you..."

They stopped outside the Apothecary. "I'm sorry Harry, but I'll be truthful. That is a part of who I am. But I promise you, I'll never intentionally do anything to hurt you."

"I know," he said softly. "Should we go in?"

They entered the store, and Harry purchased a new cauldron (his had been destroyed by a series of sabotaged potions), and all of the ingredients he would need for the coming term. Daphne also purchased a few books on Antidotes to Dark Poisons. When he asked, she said the Dressler Family Library didn't have much on the subject.

After the Apothecary, they picked up owl treats for Hedwig and Yancy, Daphne's owl. Harry realized as he looked at the owls that he had been neglecting his own owl. He likes the very intelligent snowy owl, and had a feeling she might take offense to the lack of attention.

After a quick stop into Quality Quidditch Supplies to pick up replacement kneepads (his old ones had been ripped up from getting knocked off his broom by Bole and Derrick). *Well, at least Flint won't be there this year. Wonder who the replacement is. Probably Pucey. They'll need a new keeper too. Miles was a seventh year.*

Harry spared a glance at the Nimbus 2001 in the shops window display, and they made a quick stop into Madam Malkins so that Daphne could drop a few things off to be repaired, and also to pick up a replacement for the robes that had been torn to shreds by the Philosopher's Stone adventure.

They once more saw Elisha Finnegan and her son, Seamus. The Gryffindor nodded politely at Harry, but didn't seem to hate him anymore. Maybe that only happened when Ron was around.

On that note, as they headed back to Flourish and Blotts, they saw the Weasleys, accompanied by Ron's little sister, Ginny. When Ron spotted him, he glared viciously at him. Fred (or was it George...nope, Fred, he had the worse acne), whacked him in the shoulder. And hissed something like, "Leave him alone!" Ron had the decency to blush.

Harry fixed him with a cold stare that seemed to confuse him. He noticed his little sister again. Ginny was shorter than all of the Weasleys and had a childlike glee, probably caused by anticipation of going to Hogwarts. Harry decided he'd give her a chance, no matter how awful her brother was.

Fred and George seemed to have warmed to him a bit. Percy hadn't ever acknowledged his presence, and had been quite annoyed when Hermione had tried to converse with him.

Speaking of his bushy haired best friend, she was currently rushing through the crowd, making a beeline for his location. She stopped in front of him expectantly, and when Harry didn't do anything instantly, she wrapped him in a warm embrace. Harry returned it.

"You know, you haven't been gone *that* long," he pointed out as they broke apart.

He glanced over her shoulder, and saw that Ginny was fixing Hermione with something resembling a glare, while her face was bright red. Harry sighed inwardly. *Great, the "Littlest Weasley" has a crush on me. Absolutely smashing.*

They entered Flourish and Blotts, where Lockhart was speaking to an assembled crowd. When Harry made to go search for his school books, Hermione stopped him.

"Harry, it *Gilderoy Lockhart!*" she squealed, with excitement shining in her eyes. "You don't get to see him everyday!"

Harry blanched. "Please. Please don't tell me you fancy him," he said disgustedly. This wasn't what he was expecting. From what Daphne had said, Hermione should see right through him. Apparently not.

Hermione looked insulted...which made Harry more confident that his best friend had a crush on the fraud. He'd have to disillusion her sooner or later, but he wasn't in the mood for an argument. "Fine."

They walked over into the crowd, and Harry spotted the Weasleys straining for a better look at the man in the center. Daphne waved to him, and Harry saw her in the corner across from him, talking with Hermione's parents.

He also saw Theodore Nott, paying absolutely no attention to the chaos around him, sitting on a chair, reading a book that Harry couldn't see the title of. Without looking up, he waved at Harry. Harry scowled; he had no idea how Nott did that.

Or how he knew Harry was scowling and lowered the book just long enough to smirk triumphantly at him.

Infuriated, Harry turned his attention back to Lockhart. He was tall, with blindingly shining blond hair and perfectly white teeth. His blue eyes were sparkling mischievously.

He was the perfect picture of a handsome, accomplished young wizard. And sadly, Harry could see why Hermione liked him. And why she was currently staring at him intensely. Harry quashed an urge to kick his friend in the shins. Still, he'd have to have a long talk with her about Lockhart.

Hopefully she'd see the light.

Currently, Lockhart's mouth was moving, and he listened to see what he was saying.

"-And I'd like to thank my publisher for all his wonderful work. I thank all of my fans and...Great Merlin, is that *Harry Potter*?"

Harry cursed at being recognized, then realized his fringe, which he normally combed over his scar, wasn't covering his distinguishing feature anymore.

Lockhart began pushing into the crowd, making girls swoon at his touch, while Harry tried to back away. He didn't trust this guy, not one bit. Harry was influential, simply because of his fame. If Lockhart found out that Harry knew he was a fraud, it might not be pleasant.

Unfortunately, Harry ran into a wall of wizards and witches, which pushed him back at Lockhart, who grabbed the sleeve of his robes and dragged him forward towards the stack of books that he had been standing next to. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Daphne begin to move.

"Why my, my, Mr. Potter! How excellent to see a fellow celebrity on this fine day!" He gestured to the Daily Prophet photographer, then rather roughly pulled Harry around so that he was facing front.

"Smile Harry, together, we are worth the front – ACK!"

Lockhart stopped speaking because Daphne's wand had suddenly appeared underneath his chin. The owner of the dark mahogany and blue phoenix feather wand was glaring at him, something malicious burning in her eyes.

"I recommend you release my ward, Gilderoy. Else I'll be forced to challenge you to a duel, *and show the world what a pathetic fraud you are...care to match the 'Killer' of the Wagga-Wagga Werewolf against the Grey Maiden?*" she whispered so that only she, the fraud, and Harry could hear her.

Lockhart shook his head sharply. He looked like he was about to wet himself. Daphne's wand tip was glowing slightly, and he was trying to look down at the wand rather than look Daphne in the eyes.

Daphne locked eyes with him, and he let out a whimper. He limply released Harry, and Daphne grabbed his hand, then withdrew her wand, sliding it back into her battered Auror-issue black leather wrist holster. They pushed their way back through the crowd, and out of the building.

Harry caught his breath. "Thanks Daph, I don't really trust him. I tried to get away."

"I know you did, Harry, and I didn't think the idiot was stupid enough to manhandle my adopted son in plain view of me. My facial feature makes it quite difficult to mistake me for someone else," she said, referring to the scar that bisected her right eye, continuing both above and below her grey-green orb.

It was a relic of the first war, an injury she had received from a partially blocked Slicing Curse the night of Edmond Dressler's murder. Daphne kept it as a reminder of what she had lost. Harry personally believed it made her look more intimidating, though rare was the occasion that even a fraction of Daphne's fury was directed at him.

"Well, I appreciated it. I think Hermione has a crush on him." Daphne blinked.

"I most certainly do *not* Harry James Potter," Hermione said from behind him. She rounded on Daphne. "What do you think you were doing in there?"

Daphne fixed her with a cold gaze, one that made Hermione flinch. "I was protecting my son, Hermione. Lockhart's a pompous fool with a swollen head."

"But he—"

Harry decided to save the re-education of Hermione Granger on the subject of Gilderoy Lockhart for another day (and keep her from blowing up at him in front of her parents). "It doesn't matter, Hermione. Daphne doesn't think much of him. Let's go back inside, we need to get our books anyway."

They re-entered the bookstore, and were immediately drawn to the sight of Lucius Malfoy (Daphne's face hardened) and Arthur Weasley, with Draco standing off in the shadows. Lucius, from the sound of it, was insulting the Weasley's wealth.

“How sad it is that such a *dignified* pureblood family has sunk so low they must appeal to *Muggles* for comfort,” Lucius said, sneering. Arthur Weasley turned red, but it was Daphne who answered.

“And how sad it is that former Death Eaters are able to buy their way out of Azkaban by paying off such a *dignified* government as the Ministry of Magic, Lucius.”

The tall, blond-haired man spun around. “Dressler!” he snarled.

Daphne stood straight up, her face stony. “Lucius.”

“So this is the company you keep, a *murderer*, the friend of a mudblood, and a pair of *Muggles*? I suppose like attracts like.”

With that Arthur Weasley lunged at Lucius Malfoy, slugging him the jaw. He stumbled back, crashing into a bookshelf. Daphne was in motion immediately, and tried to pry the Weasley patriarch off the ex-Death Eater.

Lucius shoved both of them away, and withdrew his wand from his cane. “*Abrumpo!*” he snarled at Daphne.

Daphne made a whip like motion, creating a ethereal green shield that reflected the curse into the ceiling.

She raised her wand to incant her own curse, fire burning in her eyes.

In the confusion, Harry didn’t notice Draco Malfoy walk by.

And he didn’t notice the small, plain black diary that fell out of the Malfoy heir’s robes, and into Harry’s brand new pewter cauldron.

Hagrid arrived just in time to prevent things getting really ugly. He shoved Lucius and Arthur apart, and Daphne retreated. Or at least, she did until Hagrid gave her a clean line of sight. For as soon as he moved, she crossed the distance between the ex-Death Eater and herself in a pair of long strides, and hammered him across the face.

Lucius fell back from the force of the blow. “*That was for Lily,*” she hissed.

Then she spun on her heel and left, Harry trailing after her.

The Grangers soon followed, rather confused as to why these men were fighting, and why one of them had referred to their daughter's best friend's guardian as a 'murderer.' Hermione clarified that Daphne had indeed killed people as an Auror, which she explained as a cross between a policeman and an elite soldier.

As they passed Knockturn Alley on their way back to the Leakey Cauldron, they saw the Malfoys duck in. Daphne's eyes lit up.

"I'm going to go see what they're up to," she said. She waved her wand, transfiguring her crimson robes into a plain black with a hood. Hermione looked impressed by her demonstration of advanced Transfiguration. She turned back to Harry, her face hidden by the cowl of her robes. "Wait for me in the Leaky Cauldron, Harry, I won't be long." And with that, she was gone.

They proceeded to the Leaky Cauldron, just in time to see the Weasleys jump into the fireplace one by one and vanish in the green floo-flames. The Grangers were startled, and Hermione explained about Floo travel. They still looked rather baffled by the concept of traveling in fireplaces.

While they were sharing a drink, Daphne returned. She was limping slightly. "Lost them in Borgin and Burkes, and had to deal with a couple of rather aggressive hags. I'm fine, just a bruise, but I had to hex both of them."

Harry winced. Normally, when Daphne hexed someone, they didn't get up for a while. The Grangers looked stunned that this sort of violence was commonplace, and were probably starting to wonder how safe it was for their daughter to be growing up in this world. Harry wondered how Hermione had explained the horrible scar across her stomach from Voldemort's Slicing Curse.

"I don't understand," Gregory Granger finally said. "How does this go on? In our world, we don't punch out *anyone* at *anytime*! We act *civilized*!" A number of wizards turned to look at him, wondering what this *Muggle* was doing criticizing their way of life.

“Mr. Granger, I was in what you would call ‘a bad neighborhood.’ As for the bookstore, Lucius injured Harry’s mother severely during the First War, and got off because he paid off the Ministry, saying that he was being controlled by Voldemort. (Hermione shuddered, while the Grangers looked at her, confused) Daphne stared. “Surely you know about Voldemort?”

“We’ve heard the name before,” Jane Granger admitted. Hermione suddenly looked horrified, as if she feared Daphne might reveal what really happened to her. “We assume he was a bad person.”

“He was. He was a feared Dark Wizard who murdered countless people, wizards, squibs, and muggles alike. He tried to kill Harry, but because his mother sacrificed herself for him, the curse backfired and killed him instead.”

The look of relief on Hermione’s face when Daphne didn’t mention what had happened the previous year would have been priceless, except for the fact that Hermione’s parents might pull her out of Hogwarts. Harry wasn’t sure he could *survive* school without Hermione.

“Oh...so this Voldemort person is gone, then?” Harry flinched, and Hermione looked away. Daphne didn’t miss a beat. “Yes. He hasn’t been seen in eleven years. But he was so terrible that people still fear his name. You have no idea what it was like, the uncertainty, the fear. Harry’s famous in our world for his involvement, though I assure you he doesn’t ask for it,” she said, beaming proudly down at her nephew.

The Grangers nodded. Jane spoke after a long silence. “So, Daphne. Should we tell them about our little surprise?” Daphne nodded.

“What surprise?” Hermione asked.

“Well, how would you like to spend the rest of the summer with Harry, dear?” Hermione brightened instantly.

“You’d let me do that? Thank you so much Mum!” she squealed happily. She pulled her mother into a hug.

“Behave yourself, young lady,” her father said, giving her daughter a pat on the back. Hermione pulled him into a hug too.

Harry had noticed that about Hermione. She gave a lot of hugs. Not that he was complaining; he felt reassured and safe when in her arms. It was odd, because he was beyond certain he had no romantic feelings for his best friend. And he was just as certain that she felt the same way. Somehow he knew that.

It really wasn't that surprising that people mistook them for a couple. Not that that excused Tonks; she had full knowledge of the situation.

“Is that okay, Harry?” Daphne asked him.

“Bloody Brilliant!” Harry exclaimed.

“Harry, language,” Daphne scolded.

“Sorry,” he replied bashfully.

“So one of those creatures, (‘house-elves’ you called them?), will come to collect Hermione’s things?” Jane Granger asked.

“Yes. Just warning you, he’ll materialize in your house with a rather loud ‘crack.’ That’s just displaced air, don’t worry about it.”

“What?” Gregory Granger asked.

“If you hear a loud ‘crack,’ that’s Yonky. He’s a little green creature about thigh-high, and he’s rather eager to please.”

“Alright then,” Jane said, still obviously confused.

After Hermione said goodbye to her parents, they departed the Leaky Cauldron and headed back to Dressler Manor. Floppy showed Hermione to her room, the same one on the second floor that Tonks used. Daphne rarely ventured into the west wing of the manor, simply because it wasn’t needed. The East wing had the kitchen, two sitting rooms, the entrance hall, five bedrooms, and the library.

Hermione came up to Harry the next evening after dinner, and Harry could tell she was bursting to ask something.

“What is it, Hermione?” Harry asked, looking up from the book he was reading.

“Well, Harry, I just wanted to ask about the house-elves,” she said sheepishly. Harry nodded.

“What about them?”

“Are they happy? I mean, they are more or less slaves! They don’t get pensions or vacations, and they don’t work for anything! I mean, slavery was outlawed in the Muggle world over one hundred years ago, and I know the wizarding world is different, but house-elves are sentient creatures, aren’t they?” Hermione was ranting now.

“Well, you see Hermione, they’ve been bound to serve wizards for a long time.” Harry had actually read up on the subject, though he had been searching for information on goblins rather than house-elves.

“Why does that matter?” she cried indignantly. “Just because they are used to it doesn’t mean that it’s right!”

“Hermione, there is nothing house-elves enjoy more than serving their masters. It is their purpose for existing.”

“That’s not right! Why hasn’t anyone done anything about it! They’ve been brainwashed!”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Hermione, how much have you read up on house-elves?”

“Well, the Dressler Family Library is an excellent resource. But I haven’t found any attempts to give house-elves the rights they deserve!”

“Which isn’t surprising...because it’s a hopeless cause.”

“What? How can you say that?” Hermione said, her eyes flashing. Harry was getting the idea that her passion for this might be related to pureblood resentment for muggleborns. *Or any kind of injustice...*

“Hermione, house-elves were bound to serve wizards before the time of the Founders, all the way back to Ancient Rome. House-elves have powerful magic, more powerful than most wizards. The people at the time felt it the best course of action.”

“Well, that’s great. Why hasn’t anyone done anything since then? Are wizards just too lazy to exist without slave labor?”

“Well, in part, that is true. We’ve become accustomed to house-elves doing our work for us. Part of the reason is that during the Dark Ages, which affected magical peoples as well, the knowledge of how the bounding magic works was lost. People have worked to rediscover it, but it is entirely different from the magic that binds, say, goblins.”

Hermione looked up in surprise. “Goblins are bound too? Then how have they kept revolting through the ages? And how do you know all these things?”

“First, not really. Goblins are bound by magical agreements that were signed after the Goblin Rebellion of 1838. It gives the goblins a right to self-government in their internal affairs, and a renewing contract to operate Gringotts and all its subsidiaries. They also have mining rights, but that’s less important now that most of the natural resources of Britain have been extracted. As for how I know? Daphne only let me study History of Magic, and I read quite a bit on the subject. I find it quite interesting, the only reason that I can stay awake in Binns’ Class.”

“He’s not that boring!” Hermione said indignantly. Harry stared at her. “Alright, he *can* put you into a bit of a stupor.”

“He drones,” Harry summarized. “I’m just lucky I’m interested in magical history. So does that answer your question?”

“About the house-elves? Yeah, I guess,” she said, trailing off in disappointment.

“Who knows, maybe one day you’ll uncover the secret. But good luck getting the purebloods to let their servants go. As for my family, we need them. We don’t spend much time at Dressler Manor, so without them, this place would be a wreck. I mean, we treat them well, giving them clean uniforms, forbidding them to punish themselves, and paying for their food. I can’t say the same of other families. That elf that showed up in my bedroom, Dobby? He looked pitiful.”

“I wonder what family he came from...because it’s obviously not a family that hates you, or he wouldn’t have come to warn you.”

“Actually, Hermione, I’m dead certain it is a family that means me harm. Because the way Dobby was acting, he was not supposed to be there. At least that’s what I thought. He also called his family Dark Wizards, and I see no reason for him to lie. House-elves venerate me to an extent, because they’ve been treated better since the Fall of Voldemort. That he disobeyed his master out of concern for my safety says a lot.”

Hermione was quiet. “Well, that’s something to think about.”

Harry and Hermione took full advantage of the Dressler Library, both writing far more than was necessary for their homework assignments. But something was bothering Harry.

It was Ron Weasley. And it concerned how he would react to Harry’s shameless blackmail the previous year.

Harry had survived his first year (barely), and gained an amazing friend in Hermione. But he was in no mood to go through it again. He wanted to try and be a little more subtle in his behavior, as much as that was possible for the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry was tempted to ask Hermione for potential blackmail information if Weasley gave him trouble, but Harry was certain that Hermione would refuse, and wasn’t sure if it would be effective anyway. More than likely, Ron would just spread more rumors. What really baffled Harry was the reason why the Gryffindors bothered to follow a hopeless idiot like Ron.

Based on Seamus’s behavior, he might actually be able to have a conversation with a Gryffindor with hexing him or her.

Though that might be wishful thinking.

Inside the diary of Tom Marvolo Riddle, something stirred. The consciousness that had lain dormant for over fifty years began to awaken. All that remained was for the connection to be established.

Tom had waited half a century. He could wait until curiosity got the better of his next victim.

The Heir of Slytherin was very patient indeed.

Chapter 3: The Littlest Weasley

Ginevra Molly Weasley was the youngest child in a family that included seven children. She was also the only girl, and as such, her mother's pride and joy. She loved her brothers, even if they did annoy her from time to time. Afterall, she was quite adept at paying them back by getting them in trouble. She prided herself in her acting skills. When she got her hands on a wand, the results were also frightening.

Fred nearly wet his pants at the mention of the word "bat-bogey."

But this year was special. Because she had turned eleven.

For her entire life, every year at least one of her brothers would go away to the magical place called Hogwarts on September 1st, and return for the summer with their heads full of knowledge and telling tales of excellent adventures at the wizarding school.

And the Weasleys had indeed accomplished great things at Hogwarts. Her favorite brother, and the only person she could ever confide in, Bill, had been Head Boy, and had gone on to a career as a Curse Breaker, a dangerous and difficult occupation. Charlie had been the Quidditch captain, and one of the best Seekers Gryffindor had ever had, and he was now working in the mountains of Romania, taking care of his second love, dragons. Percy, as uptight and stuck-up as he could be, was an excellent student, and a prefect. He was probably headed for a job with the Ministry. Mum had been really proud of his O.W.L. scores.

Then you had Fred and George, the pranksters. They were annoying, but Ginny loved them all the same. Even though they didn't get good marks all the time, Ginny knew they were extremely bright. They just used their talents to devise new and better ways of blowing things up.

Even Ron, in his first year at Hogwarts, had accomplished something. It had been his ten points, awarded at the last minute, which gave Gryffindor the House Cup. But she had also been at odds with Ron, because he had come home saying terrible things about Harry Potter. Things that simply couldn't be true.

Ginny had always loved the story of Harry Potter. It was a tragic story about a baby who had defeated an evil wizard. She had begged her parents and Bill to tell her the story over and over again. She'd often wondered what had happened to them.

Then, last year, she had seen her childhood idol. She hadn't know it at first, but the black-haired, green-eyed, bespectacled boy shyly hiding behind some woman named Daphne, who apparently knew her Mum, was the savior of the wizarding world.

Ginny just knew that he was brave, heroic, and dashing. A Gryffindor for sure!

But then Ron had come home. And he said that the Boy-Who-Lived was a terrible person. And that he had been Sorted into *Slytherin*! Ron was ranting about they were all Dark Wizards! How could her hero be Sorted there?

Ginny hadn't wanted to believe it, so she'd asked her brothers. They confirmed her fears.

Ron said that Harry Potter was sly and deceitful. That he was learning Dark Magic, and that he'd somehow gotten a very nice, if bossy girl, Hermione Granger, to be his friend. Ron thought that he had used Dark Magic, or at least, that's what he said. Not wanting to believe this, she asked her brothers. After they had teased her mercilessly about it, they admitted they though Harry was a bit unusual, but that he didn't seem that bad. They also said Harry hated Ron, because Ron kept making up things about him, and making the school hate him.

Now Ginny was very confused. So she asked Percy.

Who promptly told her to go away.

So Ginny was stuck. Fred and George thought Harry was alright, but Ron thought he was an evil git. And Percy simply wouldn't talk about it.

So she asked Mum.

Mum was surprised that she was asking, and said that she knew the woman that had raised Harry after his parents had been killed, Daphne Dressler. She said that she was an Auror in the First War, and that she was a very charming and interesting person. She said she couldn't see how such a woman could raise a child as evil as Ron said.

And as happened quite often, that ended in a very loud shouting match that could be heard all over Ottery St. Catchpole. Basically, Mum had asked Fred and George about what Ron had been doing at school. It was only one mention of "making up nasty rumors" before she marched up to Ron's room and began yelling at him for being dishonest and hurtful. Ron didn't mention Harry's name after that, though he seemed to be colder to Ginny.

Ginny was currently up in her room. It was the night of August 31st, and tomorrow, she would go to Hogwarts. The previous week, she had seen Harry Potter in Flourish and Blotts, and Daphne Dressler had cause quite a scene with a man that Dad didn't seem to like much. She later found out his name was Lucius Malfoy, and that he didn't like muggles. Consequently, he didn't like the Weasleys, because Dad worked in an office dedicated to helping Muggles.

Still she refused to give up on Harry Potter until she had met him for herself. That would be difficult though, because she was sure she'd be Sorted into Gryffindor. She didn't want to be a Slytherin, at least, she didn't want to be a Slytherin if they were all like Ron said they were. But Ron said a lot of things...

Well, Mum had always taught her to keep an open mind, and to not 'judge a book by its cover.' She supposed this was what she had been talking about.

The morning of September 1st was always chaotic for the Weasley family. Of course, now Ginny would be going as well, a total of five Weasleys that would be leaving for the year, leaving Mum all alone. Except for Dad, of course.

Ginny woke up early, she'd had trouble sleeping because she was so excited about her first trip on the Hogwarts Express. For so many

years she'd dreamed of this day. She couldn't wait to start learning things. She wanted to be as good as Bill.

Bill was the epitome of 'cool.' He was smart, he was funny, and he was nice. He'd always defended Ginny against her brothers, and taught her a lot about all manner of things. He'd even showed her the book from which she had picked up the Bat-Bogey Hex, which served as an equalizer between her and her brothers.

She'd first hexed Fred after he'd rigged a bucket of water over her door and gotten her soaking wet when she went down to breakfast. Mum had scolded her for stealing her wand, but it was worth it. Fred and George treaded lightly around her from then on.

She wondered what they would say if they knew she had been breaking into the broomshed since she was six years old and riding their brooms. She actually thought she was quite good at flying, and hoped to try out for the Quidditch team in her second year.

Ginny packed her thing neatly, something she'd picked up from her mother, who had used it to combat the chaos of the Burrow. She pressed her second-hand robes and books into the trunk, and loaded her cauldron, several changes of clothes (unlike her mother, she liked Muggle clothing like jeans), some ink and parchment, and anything else she thought she would need. She put her grandmother's old wand in her jean pocket, and headed down to breakfast.

Mum was already up, and various pots and pans were floating about, performing various tasks. As the mother of seven hungry children, Mum was an excellent cook. She greeted her daughter warmly and asked if she was nervous. Ginny, of course, said she wasn't, though that wasn't true at all. Mum believed her though.

As the sun rose in the sky, the Weasley males began to slowly migrate downstairs. Her father was first, and he was sitting reading the *Daily Prophet* when a sleepy-looking Percy descended. Despite his obvious fatigue, his hair was combed and his clothes spotless. His prefect's badge shined brightly on his chest. He greeted Mum and Dad and sat down, reading sections of the *Daily Prophet* as Dad finished them.

Mum served breakfast, and the smell of eggs and bacon wafting up to the top bedroom finally drew Ron out of hibernation. He came downstairs looking exhausted, but excited at the prospect of food.

Unlike Percy, it was plainly obvious he had just woken up. A few explosions echoed from the Twins room above, and some dirt shook loose from the ceiling.

After their morning ritual of blowing a few things up, Fred and George innocently made their way downstairs.

After breakfast, Mum went frantic trying to return all the clothing she had been fixing up for all her children. Ron, who of course was not packed, was running around frantically, and nearly dropped Scabbers, his pet rat, down the stairs.

Fred and George appeared to be testing exactly how much prank and explosive materials could fit into two trunks, somehow still finding room for their books. Percy was of course, already packed, and commented on the subject loudly as Ron raced past him, his arm full of books, and began pounding up the stairs to his room.

Finally, they were all packed, and ready to get into the car. Her dad had an old Ford Anglia that had been 'modified' with a number of magical features, including Enlarging Charms on both the back seat and the trunk. Mum didn't approve, as these types of charms were specifically what you were not supposed to do according to the new law Dad had created. Ginny was also pretty sure that the car could fly.

However, all was not well with the Weasleys. For no excursion was complete without a frantic yell from a Weasley that they'd forgotten something.

And so after turning back four times, once each for Fred and George's Fillabuster Fireworks, Fred's broom, a pair of Percy's textbooks, and Ron's wand, they were running late, and tensions were high. Not that they weren't already high in a small car that, although magically expanded, still contained five children, two adults, an Owl, and a rat.

They arrived at King's Cross with nary a minute to spare, and hurriedly loaded their things onto trollies. They moved through the crowds of Muggles, and Percy, in a rare show of caring, offered to run with her through the barrier to Platform 9 ¾. Even though she had gone through several times before, she was still nervous.

In the end, she got through okay, and the Weasleys raced over to the luggage car and loaded their things. Mum hugged and kissed each of her children, holding on to Ginny the longest, and bid them farewell for another year. Ginny waved, and boarded the train. She began wandering up and down, looking for a compartment. She was nervous, and decided to try to sit with her brother. Surely if she stayed quiet, he'd let her ride with him.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

She entered the compartment where Ron had sat down with a black boy he addressed as Dean, a sandy-haired boy he called Seamus, and a shy, nervous looking boy he called Neville. There were a couple of girls chatting in the corner, one an Indian girl, another a brown-haired girl. Then Ron turned toward her.

"Ginny, what do you want?" he snapped. Ginny was taken aback.

"I just want to sit with you," she said quietly.

"Ginny, come on. I want to sit with my friends. Why don't you...try to meet some people? Isn't that Luna girl on the train?"

"I haven't spoken to her in two years, Ron, you know that," Ginny said firmly.

"Whatever! Just leave us alone, Ginny."

Neville spoke up. "You know, maybe we should-"

"No! Go away Ginny!" Ron said, much louder. Ginny glared at him and left. Great. Well, it wasn't as if Ron wanted anything to do with her after he'd turned eight. She'd always been the tag-along. It was true, but Ron didn't even try to hide that he didn't like her to hang out with him. Some brother he was.

Ginny walked along the corridor, passing full compartments of loudly talking people. She didn't feel comfortable asking to sit in there. She moved towards the front of the train. Then she saw a compartment that was empty except for a familiar-looking bushy-haired girl reading a book. She tapped lightly on the door frame.

"Excuse me? Could I sit here? I promise I won't be a bother."

"Alright," the girl said, looking nervous about something. "Aren't you a Weasley?" she asked politely.

"Yes. I'm Ginny."

"I'm Hermione Granger."

Ginny froze, her heart pounding loudly. But that meant...

"Hermione, who's this?" a voice called from behind her. She squeaked and moved to the side, and sure enough, Harry Potter, already dressed in his Hogwarts robes with his Slytherin crest, stood in the doorway. His eyes flashed in recognition. "Ginny Weasley," he said, answering his own question. He seemed to be debating something. "I'm guessing you want to sit with us."

"If you...if you don't mind..." she squeaked, turning bright red. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Ginny, I can tell you have a crush on me. Could you try to not be so obvious about it?" Ginny felt her cheeks burn with shame and embarrassment

"*Harry!*" Hermione scolded.

"Sorry, just wanted to get that out of the way. Sit down, Ginny."

"Um...okay," she said nervously.

Harry ran a hand through his hair. "Look, I don't like your brother. He hates me because I'm a Slytherin, and that makes other people hate me. I'll give you a chance because I don't know you. Also, I reckon

you are here because he kicked you out, and the last thing I want to do is sink to his level. So you are welcome to sit here, for now.”

Ginny’s mouth dropped open. *How did he know all this? How did he know she had a crush on him? How did he know Ron kicked her out?*

“How..?”

“How do I know those things? I’m good at reading people, it’s a skill I picked up from Daphne. Just please, don’t worship me or anything. I’m above-average in power and skill for my age, but I’m still alive because my mother died for me and Voldemort’s (Hermione jumped, Ginny squeaked) – Killing Curse happened to hit the Stone instead of my chest. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here.”

Ginny was flabbergasted. *Was he saying he didn’t do anything?*

“But...but, you s-s-saved the Stone,” she said quietly.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yes, I’ll admit that the *two of us* did some things deserving of recognition. But unlike your brother, I’m only going to take credit where credit is due. I’m going to earn my way to the top, to becoming a great wizard, not rely on blind fortune and undeserved accolades. That’s a surefire way to fail.”

“I don’t understand...what you did was so incredible!” Harry gave her an exasperated look. *“I can’t believe I’m doing this.”* Hermione, show her your stomach.”

The bushy-haired girl looked up. “What?”

“Show her your stomach. Make her understand what we did was not a game. If she does then maybe the rest of the school might follow. Hell, if they think I’m modest it gives them one less reason to hate me, right?”

Hermione shrugged, and lifted up her blouse. Ginny gasped at the vicious looking scar that ran across her lower torso. “H-H-How...?”

“Voldemort (Ginny squeaked, Hermione shuddered) – hit her at point-blank range with a Slicing Curse, and there wasn’t a damn thing I

could do about it. I'm no hero, Ginny. I'm skilled and powerful for an eleven year old, but I'm not going to be riding in on a unicorn and saving the beautiful girl from the dragon. If that's what you are expecting, than you've got another thing coming."

Ginny couldn't believe what she was hearing. Harry Potter, this mythic figure was this mature, modest Slytherin who didn't think he was anything that special. Her preconceptions were shattering before her eyes. He wanted to be powerful, to be great, but at the same time, he didn't think he was *already*.

But even though he was a bit bitter and cold, he was still taking the time to explain this all to her. He may not have cared about her, but this was scarcely the Dark Wizard that Ron had been describing.

"Well...um, I..." she began. Hermione waved her off.

"Forget it, Ginny. You are no more guilty than anyone else."

"Okay. So you're a Gryffindor, Hermione?" Ginny asked, trying to restart this conversation.

"Yes. Your brother dubbed me the "Gryffindor Traitor" for refusing to spy on the Slytherin Quidditch Practices."

"That's awful!" Ginny cried.

"Yes, it is. Well, I've got to say, Ginny, you're currently scoring much higher than Ron on my list."

"Harry, you do realize you are kind of scaring her, don't you?" Hermione asked.

"I'm trying to avoid picking up a groupie," he admitted.

Ginny's anger flared. "I am *not* a groupie!"

"No, you aren't. You probably were when you came in here, but I've haven't exactly been welcoming you with open arms. That you are still here proves something, though I'm not completely sure what. So

what House do you want to be Sorted into?" Harry asked, completely changing the subject.

"Um..well I was thinking Gryffindor," she admitted, a bit depressed.

"Ginny, there is nothing wrong with Gryffindor House. It's the idiots that inhabit it that are the problem. Go in there with an open mind, and you'll go where you are supposed to."

"Harry, you do realize that didn't exactly work that well with you, don't you?" Hermione asked, looking up from her book again.

"Well, yes...but still," Harry said. Ginny was listening intently. Watching these two go back and forth was like watching a opposing beaters whacking bludgers at each other.

"What, do you want her in Slytherin?" Hermione asked.

"Well...you don't seem that bad. Seriously, I'm dying for a friend in my own House," he said, addressing Ginny.

Ginny gaped. "You don't have any?"

"Nope. Bet Ron lied about that too."

"I don't know...I don't think I'd be a Slytherin. My whole family's been in Gryffindor." Ginny had to admit she was scared about where this conversation was going. But she couldn't be a Slytherin. She would be a Gryffindor for certain.

"And I'm the son of two Gryffindors who was raised by a Ravenclaw, who still ended up in Slytherin. Don't worry about it, Ginny. Wherever you'll go you'll be happier than I was."

"Right. And that's really a high standard," Hermione cut in sarcastically.

"Shut it, you."

Ginny tuned out the two and began to think about what she had just learned. Well, first, Harry wasn't either the dreamy hero or the evil

Dark Wizard. He was...rather cold to her, but Ginny didn't think it was personal. It really seemed like he'd been through a lot. Ginny knew one thing.

She never could have imagined how this day would turn out.

From there, Harry and Ginny actually started having a real conversation. Ginny wasn't sure what was going on with the Boy-Who-Lived, but she tried to put it behind her. It wasn't about a crush anymore; it was about making a friend. *You keep on telling yourself that, dear*, her inner voice said, sounding suspiciously like her Mum.

"So Ginny, are you interested in Quidditch?" Hermione snorted.

"Honestly, Harry, is that your idea of good conversation? Talking about a game?"

"For your information, Hermione," Ginny said, surprising herself with her daring, "I love Quidditch." Hermione looked taken aback.

"Sorry," she said weakly, then went back to reading.

"So do you have a favorite team?" she asked Harry. Somehow, talking about something as mundane as Quidditch was much easier. She figured it was because she wasn't trying to impress him anymore. She'd have to bury this crush, that was plainly obvious. Or Harry wouldn't want anything to do with her.

"Not really. They don't have professional Quidditch in Newfoundland. I know a bit about the teams, though. Isn't Weas-sorry, Ron's favorite team the Chudley Cannons or something like that?"

"Yeah, they aren't very good, either. I'm a fan of a the Holyhead Harpies."

"Isn't that the only all female team in Britain?" Harry asked. He honestly appeared to be fascinated by this discussions, and Ginny felt a surge of pride. *No! Mustn't try to do that!* she mentally screamed at herself. This was going so well, she couldn't screw it up.

"Ginny?"

“Oh, sorry,” she replied turning red. “I was elsewhere.”

“Obviously,” Harry replied, though he didn’t seem to be angry or anything. “So are they or are they not?”

“Oh, they are. There’s been a lot of pressure on them to sign male players, but the management has been adamant about it.”

And from there, the conversation continued. They discussed the professional leagues, where Harry deferred to Ginny’s greater knowledge of the subject, and then had just begun to discuss tactics when Hermione looked out the window. “Well be there soon. Harry, would you mind taking a walk while Ginny and I change? You did bring your robes, right?”

“Actually no,” she replied. “They’re in the luggage car.”

“I suggest you get moving then. I know it’s easier to store your trunk, but they’ll chew you out if you aren’t dressed,” Harry said, as he got up to leave.

Ginny ran down several cars and retrieved her robes, and returned to the compartment to see Harry leaning against the window outside the compartment. “Go ahead and change, just let me back in when you’re done. I don’t fancy standing here.”

Ginny looked at him, puzzled, and entered the compartment. Hermione was midway through changing and started when someone entered, but relaxed when she saw it was Ginny. When they were done, Harry and Ginny picked up the Quidditch conversation as if they hadn’t ever stopped, while Hermione sighed in irritation.

“You know Hermione, you’re welcome to read up on Quidditch if you’d like to.”

“As if I could understand it? Those diagrams Flint was showing up might as well have been written in Gobbledygook!” she protested indignantly. Harry snorted.

“Hermione, you can learn about and understand *anything* if you try to,” Harry replied. Hermione looked somewhat mollified by that.

The train stopped at Hogsmeade Station and Ginny made to go get her trunk. "Don't bother, Ginny. The house-elves will move your trunk to your new dorm," Harry said.

"*House-elves?* There are house-elves at *Hogwarts!*" Hermione cried.

"Hermione, we've been over this."

"I don't care that I can't do anything about it, but I do care that it still isn't right."

"Hermione, Hogwarts would fall apart without house-elves. Or Filch would be worked to death...which wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing."

With that, they exited the train, and Ginny looked around for Ron. Suddenly she felt someone take her hand. It was Harry, and she felt herself turning red. *Stop! I do not have a crush on him!*

He dragged her forward through the crowd, to a very large man who looked quite intimidating standing there in the darkness, holding a large lantern. He greeted Harry warmly.

"Why if it ain't 'Arry! How are yeh doing?" he asked jovially.

"Pretty good, Hagrid, hoping for a better year than last. Listen, this is Ginny Weasley, one of the first years."

"Hi," Ginny said weakly.

"Hello there, I'm Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of the Keys and Grounds 'ere at Hogwarts. So yer the girl Weasley then?"

"Yeah," she said, noticing that Harry had gone. And that Ron was currently glaring daggers at him. *Uh oh. He must have seen him holding my hand...*

"Oi! Ginny, I want to talk to you!" Ron called over.

"Excuse me, Hagrid. What do you want, Ron?" she asked irritably.

“What were you doing on the arm of that *Slytherin*! I know you have a crush on him but Ginny-“

“Oh, nice Ron. Just yell it out for the whole world to hear,” Neville interrupted. “Harry’s not that bad, you know.”

“*Ginny, stay away from him*,” Ron warned.

“Or what?” she snapped back. “Just because I rode in the train with him and Hermione because *you* wouldn’t let me sit with you-“

“You stayed with them for the train ride? Ginny, what were you thinking?”

“Nothing Ron, I needed a compartment, and didn’t even know Harry was there. When he came in, I didn’t want to look stupid by leaving.”

“Yeah, like that’s the real reason. He’s sinking his hooks into you, just like Hermione!”

“I beg to differ, Ron. They are best friends. You’re just jealous!”

“What?”

“You heard me. You don’t like that Harry didn’t go into Gryffindor with you, so you make up reasons to hate him. Well, I hope you’re happy, Ron, because it sounds like you were one of the reasons his first year was so miserable.”

Ron looked like he’d been slapped. “Ginny-“

“FIRST YEAR OVER ‘ERE! FIRST YEARS!” Hagrid called. Ginny walked toward him without saying anything to her speechless brother.

The other First Years boarded small boats that Ginny wasn’t sure would actually stay afloat, much less support Hagrid’s weight. Nonetheless, none of them sank. Ginny spotted a familiar sight, a girl with dirty blonde hair, a necklace of butterbeer corks and her wand tucked behind her ear.

“Hi Luna!” Ginny called. Luna Lovegood, one of her childhood friends, turned to face her.

“Hello Ginevra. I’m just checking the boats for Horned Toadstraddles. They bore holes in the bottom of boats like these.” Ginny gaped at her for a moment. This was *not* the Luna she remembered.

“Luna, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. You are the one who’s hair is infested with nargles.”

“Luna, neither of the two creatures you’ve talked about actually exists,” Ginny reminded her. It didn’t seem to faze the blue-eyed girl.

“Yes they do. Dad says he’s seen both of them. He earned an award from the Prime Minister of Antarctica for clearing up a Nargle infestation.”

“What about your Mum, what does she say about this?” she asked as the boats pushed off.

“She doesn’t say much of anything anymore. She’s dead after all,” Luna said, in a tone that one would use to discuss the weather. *Maybe she really has gone off the deep end...*

“Oh, I’m sorry Luna. When did she die?” *That’s considerate, Ginny. Who are you, Ron?*

Luna wasn’t fazed or if she was, it didn’t show. “Two years ago. I haven’t seen you since she blew herself up. She was a brilliant witch, but she kept trying to invent new spells.”

“That’s awful!” Ginny cried.

“Yes, very. I watched it, you know. Very sad. At least the Heliopaths didn’t get her.”

And that was the end of that conversation. Luna had been very quiet as a young girl, but Ginny wasn’t certain if she was entirely there anymore. She noticed another girl in their boat. She was slightly taller

than Ginny, but more solidly built, with dark brown hair in a ponytail and hazel eyes. Ginny tapped her on the shoulder.

"Yes?" she asked.

"I just wanted to know who you were, I'm trying to get to know some people," Ginny explained.

"Oh. I'm Anne. Anne Grunitch. And you are?"

"Ginny Weasley."

"Nice to meet you. You nervous about the Sorting?" Anne asked her.

"Sort of. Where do you think you want to go?"

"Slytherin," the girl replied without pausing. "Both my parents were, and everyone says I'm just like them. It's a house where you can really go far if you've got enough talent."

"What about you Luna?" Ginny asked, hoping to get a normal answer.

"Ravenclaw," she replied dreamily. "That's what Mum was. Dad was a Gryffindor, but he always wondered how that happened. Who's your friend?"

"Anne Grunitch."

"Luna Lovegood," she replied, staring out over the water. "What about you, Ginevra?"

"Luna, could you call me 'Ginny'?"

"Why? Is Ginevra not your real name? Or are you an imposter possessed by a heliopath pretending to be Ginevra Weasley?"

"No, I'm real alright. As for my House, I really don't know. I thought could only be a Gryffindor, but now I don't know."

"What happens will happen," Anne said. "Just go with it, that's my family's motto. And try to get as much out of the situation as you can, by any means necessary."

“How does that apply to my Sorting?” Ginny asked.

“It doesn’t, or at least, the second part doesn’t. Wow, isn’t that a sight!”

Looming high above them was the huge castle of Hogwarts. Ginny still couldn’t believe she was really here.

They moored the boats inside the massive castle, and were greeted by a rather severe looking woman in who identified herself as Professor McGonagall, who instructed them to smarten up before they entered the Great Hall. Finally, after what seemed like several ages, they were led to a table in the middle of the Great Hall. Hermione waved at her from the Gryffindor table, and Harry smiled at her when she met his eyes. Fred and George were waving madly at her.

It was really too bad that Harry had to be alone in Slytherin, Ginny thought.

McGonagall gave some instructions about how they were to be sorted, and Ginny listened intently as she explained about the Sorting Hat, which surprised Ginny when it started to *sing*.

Then she began to call people up to try on the hat.

“Acheson, Dean.” “SLYTHERIN!”

“Corner, Micheal.” A boy with short black hair ran up.
“RAVENCLAW!”

“Crane, Alison.” A dark haired girl with bright blue eyes ran up.
“HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Creevey, Colin.” A skinny boy with short brown hair, who spared a glance at Harry as he ran, eagerly jammed the hat onto his head. After about a minute, the Hat shouted, “GRYFFINDOR!”

“Gannon, Robert.” A boy with short-cropped blond hair and beady blue eyes ran up. “SLYTHERIN!”

“Goldstein, Elizabeth.” Ginny had heard Ron talk about Anthony Goldstein, and figured they must be related. “RAVENCLAW!”

“Grunitch, Anne.” Ginny’s new friend ran up, and sure enough... “SLYTHERIN!”

“Kelly, Nathaniel.” “GRYFFINDOR!”

“Kelton, David.” “GRYFFINDOR!”

“Lovegood, Luna.” Luna ran up to the hat, and calmly placed it on her head. For about a minute, she seemed to be arguing with it. Finally, “RAVENCLAW!”

“Lynch, Francis.” A tall lanky boy with long brown hair that partially covered his eyes ran up to the stool. “SLYTHERIN!”

“MacDonald, Natalie.” An energetic looking brown-haired girl ran up. “GRYFFINDOR!”

“Maier, Jeffrey.” A buck-toothed boy with light brown hair ran up. “HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Mason, Emma.” “GRYFFINDOR!”

“Michaels, Joseph.” “RAVENCLAW!”

“Moore, Angelica.” “HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Morgan, Laurey.” “HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Porter, Daisy.” “RAVENCLAW!”

“Putnam, Thomas.” “HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Quinn, Melissa.” A tall girl with curly, long rust-brown hair ran up. Her green eyes scanned the crowd as she sat down. “SLYTHERIN!”

“Robbins, Demelza.” A black girl with short black hair pulled into a ponytail ran up. “GRYFFINDOR!”

“Rodgers, Connor.” “RAVENCLAW!”

"Shepardson, Malcom." "SLYTHERIN!"

"Ryder, James." A short boy with freckles, glasses, and dark brown hair ran up, looking very nervous. Surprisingly... "GRYFFINDOR!"

"Weasley, Ginevra," McGonagall called. Ginny got up and took a deep breath. She looked over at Hermione to see her smiling at her, while Harry seemed to be in a conversation with a blond-haired girl. Ron wasn't even paying attention, though Percy had straightened up and was looking expectant, and Fred and George were waving and grinning madly.

After a walk that seemed take hours, she sat down on the stool, and pulled the Sorting Hat over her eyes.

"Um...Hello?" she whispered.

No need to speak, Ms. Weasley. I can hear it all in your head.

"Oh. So where am I going?"

Impatient, aren't you, Ginevra. Hmm...the first female Weasley in a long time. Six generations, actually.

"Yeah, I think that's right."

"But I'm not here to discuss your genealogy. Let's have a look here...hmm, this isn't what I expected.

"What is it?"

Well, your brothers were quite simple, as were your parents. Much bravery in both of your parents, and also in their eldest son. They were born Gryffindors. Percival was...a bit more difficult. Quite ambitious he is. The twins were obvious choices for Godric's House as well. As was Ronald. But you are different.

"How?"

You admire William, the most accomplished of your brothers. Quite a difficult occupation he has chosen, a Curse Breaker. You wish to be

just like him: Head Girl, powerful and skilled. Yes, I sense the same ambition that I saw in Percival.

“Well, Percy’s a prefect with great marks...so Gryffindor then?”

Not so fast, Ms. Weasley. Hmm...quite crafty you are, a good actor as well. Not a bad mind either, in fact, you have great potential. You are loyal, but there is a price to your loyalty...you want to trust them. There is courage here, oh yes, but you aren’t impulsive. You prefer to think things over.

“That sounds good.”

Indeed. Hmm...Stealing your brother’s brooms at night to practice on...quite crafty that was. And I see you are quite adept at escaping trouble, young lady. You shouldn’t trick your mother like that.

“I guess not.”

Well, this is quite a surprise, but I know where to put you...

“Okay, I guess it’ll be okay in Gryff-“

“SLYTHERIN!”

Chapter 4: Reminders of the Past

After Harry saw Ginny leave with the rest of the First Years, he caught up with Hermione, who was talking with Mandy Brocklehurst. He walked over to her.

"Hey Hermione. Hi Mandy, how was your summer?"

"Pretty good. How are you doing? Still angry with Weasley?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Harry asked rhetorically. Mandy shrugged.

"Well, it's been three months. I know you are bitter over the whole Leaving Fest thing, but..."

"But what? He made my life a living hell and then stole the House Cup from my House. His antics could have gotten me killed. I wouldn't have made it if he'd stopped Hermione."

"Oh, well then hating him is pretty understandable...Hi Terry!"

Terry Boot, a boy about Harry's height with sharp blue eyes and short black hair, walked over to them. "Hello Harry, Hermione, Mandy. How were your summers?"

"Good, but we should get in a carriage," Hermione pointed out, "they are leaving soon."

"I've got one with Lisa," Terry said. "Why don't the six of us ride together?"

"Sounds like a good idea," Harry said. They walked out of the station and headed for where the carriages were. Suddenly, Harry froze, his eyes widening.

"Harry? Are you okay?" Mandy asked, concerned.

"*Thestrals*," he breathed. Mandy looked puzzled, while Hermione's eyes lit up with realization.

"Harry, you can see them, can't you. Because you saw Quirrell die." Harry nodded dumbly, the realization that he *had* seen someone die

a horrific death in front of his very eyes. Memories of that night in the Chamber, from the Cruciatus Curses to the Slicing Curse hitting Hermione's chest, and then her body lying limply on the floor, her blood staining the stones, rose in his mind unbidden. He suddenly felt very cold.

Terry was confused. "Well, you certainly didn't mention *that*. But what does this have to do with the carriages?"

"They pull them," Hermione explained. "Only a few students can see them, so no one asks questions."

"*Thestrals* pull the *carriages*? They allow creatures that are classified as *Dark*, are extremely difficult to domesticate, and are considered unlucky by the general wizarding world to pull the *carriages*? How long have you two known?"

"Since last Christmas Break," Harry said, his eyes still not moving from the dark, red-eyed flying horses.

"What? How did you-"

"They reacted strangely to Harry, so Hagrid told us. And for second, Harry said he could see an outline."

"I saw a flash of the thing," Harry clarified. "Hagrid was surprised I couldn't see them." He turned back to them. "My mother died in front of me."

"That's awful," Lisa Turpin said, emerging from the carriage. The bespectacled girl with mahogany-colored hair and light blue, almost gray eyes, stared at Harry expectantly. "Was that before you got the scar?"

Harry closed his eyes. "It was *because* of her that I got the scar. She sacrificed her life for me. Her magic saved me. I was just a baby, I didn't do anything."

"So you aren't really powerful or anything like that?" Mandy asked. Harry shook his head, but remained silent, trying to fight down the memories of the past.

“No. He’s a skilled wizard, but he can’t take credit for stopping You-Know-Who,” Hermione said for him.

On that note, they boarded the carriages. Hermione was mystified by the strange, alien look in Harry’s eyes. He suddenly looked a hundred years older, and she couldn’t figure out why seeing the thestrals caused such a reaction.

The carriages rolled up the hill through the cold night, and Mandy and Lisa huddled in a corner, while Hermione lit some of her patented bluebell flames to warm the carriage. Harry remained distant.

As they walked through the massive front doors, a far cry from the underground entrance, Harry spotted what looked like lights out on the dark, misty surface of the lake. Obviously, it was Ginny and the other First Years making their way across the water.

Harry smiled at Hermione before they went their separate ways (it was traditional for the Welcoming Feast that students sit with their Houses), and walked over to where Theodore Nott, Daphne Greengrass, Blaise Zabini, and Elisha Moon were sitting, well away from Draco Malfoy. Speaking of whom, the pureblooded heir was eyeing him with a curious expression, as if searching for an expected sign of weakness. Harry did feel a little lightheaded. The realization that a man, no matter how evil he may have been, had died in front of him, and how close he himself had come to death, not to mention Hermione, had hit him hard.

The doors opened, and the First Years came in. Harry noticed Ginny out of the corner of his eye. Her flaming red hair was hard to miss. He looked up at her with a calculating expression, finally offering a small smile when she met his eyes. She was standing next to a curious-looking girl with shoulder-length dirty blonde hair, oddly protuberant (I love that word) blue eyes, and a very vacant expression. Her wand was tucked behind her ear, and she was wearing a necklace of...*butterbeer corks*?

Harry turned to Zabini, who was sitting next to him. “Zabini,” he said in greeting.

“Potter,” he replied. “How are you faring today?”

"Pretty well. Cold tonight," Harry said, trying not to think about the thestrals.

"Yeah. You look spooked though. Any reason for that?"

"You do look like you've seen a ghost, Potter. And I don't mean any of the ones at the school," Nott observed.

"Are you alright, Potter? You *do* look rather pale." Greengrass asked, a hint of concern entering her normally apathetic voice. Harry never would have imagined he'd resent that his classmates cared about his welfare.

"I'm okay...have you ever heard of thestrals?" he asked the three. Daphne nodded, Zabini looked confused, and comprehension dawned in Nott's beady brown eyes.

"You've seen death. Quirrell, I'm guessing. Unless somebody died in front of you this summer," he said confidently. Harry stared at him in a mixture of amusement and admiration.

"You do amaze me sometimes, you know that? How the bloody hell did you see me at Flourish and Blotts?"

"Good eyesight," Nott replied smartly. "Honestly, Harry, do you think I'd tell you my secret?" Harry was somewhat surprised by the enigmatic boy's use of his first name.

The Sorting was going on as they spoke. They were currently on

"Lovegood, Luna," who appeared to be that odd-looking girl. She was Sorted into Ravenclaw, and skipped over to the table like a girl that had just been asked out on a date or something. *Very odd.*

The Sorting continued, and Harry's sight drifted over to Ginny, who was nervously staring at the table. Zabini frowned. "What are you looking at, Potter?"

"Weasley's sister. Seems like a smart girl, actually. A bit awkward around me, but she's not all like her brother," Harry said, turning back to the black boy.

Zabini shrugged. "I'll take your word for it. Too bad she'll be lost to Gryffindor, then?"

"Really more that she'll be poisoned against Slytherin. Me, more specifically. But it's not a real loss."

"You and Granger seem pretty close," he observed.

Harry turned to stare at him, as "Morgan, Laurey" ran off to the Hufflepuff table. "What is *that* supposed to mean, Zabini?"

The boy shrugged. "I wasn't implying anything, just making an observation. She's the only one you ever talk to."

"I'm talking to you right now," Harry observed.

"You know what I mean...hey, it's the Weasley girl's turn."

"Why bother watching?" Harry asked. "She's a Gryffindor for sure."

"If that's true, she must be putting up a fierce fight with the Hat, because it's sure taking a while for a sure-fire Gryffindor," Nott commented.

Harry turned to watch the girl. She was sitting relatively still under the hat, and seemed to be shrugging often. *Maybe she's not as Gryffindorish as the rest of her family. Personally, I can't believe that the Weasley Prefect is a Gryffindor.*

The hat seemed to straighten, coming to a decision. "Why bother watching, Potter?" Elisha said. "She'll obviously be in-"

"SLYTHERIN!" The Hat cried. Harry's eyes widened.

"Well that was unexpected," he said softly.

Ginny was wearing a look of pure horror, and Harry glanced over to see what her family's reaction was. Fred and George were frowning, trying to force a smile onto their faces to support their sister, but failing miserably. Percy was wearing a look that could best be described as contempt. *Great way to show support for your sis, git.*

Of course, as Harry could have predicted, Weasley (He refused to think of the boy as Ron), was not staring at his horrified sister, who was being guided towards the Slytherin table by Professor McGonagall, but at Harry. His glare might have set Harry on fire and vaporized the ashes if such a thing were possible. He was obviously blaming the entire thing on Harry. Hermione, sitting nearby, looked like she was one nasty comment away from slapping him. As it was, Katie Bell, one of the Gryffindor Chasers, was holding her arm.

McGonagall let go of Ginny, whose arm fell weakly to hang at her side. As if in a trance, she wandered towards the only friendly face: him. Deciding that he'd spare her the embarrassment of rejection, he quickly gestured to Zabini, who scooted over so that a stool was available next to Harry.

A glance at Ginny's face revealed that it was screwed up in an effort not to lose her composure. Her warm brown eyes glistened with tears. She lifelessly sat down next to Harry, and as the Feast began around them, she buried her head in her hands and began sobbing. Harry, recognizing that her situation was all too similar to his own, patted the distraught red head on the back.

Her reaction to this was unexpected, as she suddenly, and without warning, hurled herself into his arms, sobbing madly. Harry jerked back and stiffened in surprise, while Nott raised an eyebrow suggestively. Harry glared at him, and relaxed his body, patting the girl lightly on the back.

Malfoy saw this, snickered, and opened his mouth to say something. Harry removed his right hand from Ginny's back and slid his robe sleeve down, revealing his wand holster. He then sent a look of pure malice in the arrogant prat's direction. Malfoy jerked back in alarm, and Zabini was looking at him strangely.

Harry dutifully held his unwilling Housemate as her tears soaked his robes.

When Ginny had emptied her emotional reservoir, she let go of Harry and turned dark red, her eyes widening. Harry took a bite of his food,

which he had been attempting to eat with one hand, and nodded. "It's alright, Ginny. You'll get through this."

She nodded, still bright red. "I'm...sorry," she said weakly.

Harry shook his head. "Don't be. I did the same thing," he said quietly.

Surprisingly, Ginny smiled. "You hurled yourself at and cried all over your childhood idol?" she asked with a hint of amusement shining through her sadness.

Harry grinned. "More than once. After all, I admired Daphne more than anyone."

Ginny stuck her tongue out at him, wiping tears away from her eyes. "That's not what I meant."

"I know it isn't. It's okay, Ginny."

She frowned, worry evident in her eyes. "No, it's not...they hate me now..." she said sadly, referring to her family.

"No they don't. Percy is just being stuck-up as usual, Fred and George are a bit unhappy, I think, but don't blame you. And Ron, as usual, blames me."

As he said this, there was a resounding SLAP from the direction of the Gryffindor table. Harry looked over and as he expected, saw a bright red Ron Weasley and an angry looking Hermione Granger. Harry sighed as he saw his best friend disappear out the doors of the Great Hall. It was half and half odds as to where she was going: Library or Dormitory.

"Well, he probably deserved it," Ginny said, sniffing slightly.

"Oh, I guarantee he deserved it. It was likely about me coercing you with Dark Magic or something equally ridiculous. Any idea why he does that?" Harry asked, hoping to gain some insight into the mind of his other nemesis, the stupid one.

“Well, I think he was as big a fan of you...maybe not as much as I was,” she admitted shyly. Still, her willingness to speak freely like this seemed to be a good sign.

“That’s what I thought.”

Harry luckily did not have to make sure Ginny made it to her dormitory. As soon as they had entered the dungeons, her depression had returned with a vengeance. She’d managed to avoid tackling him this time, though. When they reached the stairs, a girl named Anne Grunitch led Ginny up the stairs.

Zabini was standing near the door looking oddly at him.

“Sod off, Blaise,” Harry snapped. “I had a lot of trouble also. You can’t blame me for-“

“It’s fine, Potter. That was very rude of me. Whatever you did obviously helped.”

“I hope so. She’s seems pretty bright, a nice person.”

“Hope she’s not too nice for Slytherin,” Zabini said. “She’s lucky she’s not in this year, Pansy and Millicent would tear her apart. Daphne seemed to feel a slight bit of sympathy.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, “and getting Greengrass to show sympathy is like coaxing an ass out of a ditch.”

Zabini sniggered. “We’d best go in before Flint gets us. I swear, what was Snape thinking making that troll a Prefect?”

“Flint’s still here?” Harry asked. “Didn’t he graduate?”

“No luck avoiding deadly Quidditch practices, I’m afraid. He failed every N.E.W.T. but Astronomy. Go figure that.”

“Which?” Harry asked. “The failing all his N.E.W.T.s? Or the Astronomy?”

“Shut up,” Blaise snapped.

The two boys headed into their dormitory. Malfoy complained about the light they let into the dark room. Harry didn't even give him a glance, yanking a random book out of his trunk, closing it with his foot, and jumping into bed, before locking the curtains and pulling his wand out.

He lit his wand with a whispered "*Lumos*," and pulled out the book he had taken. It was the odd diary that had inexplicably appeared in his cauldron. Harry shrugged; it would probably do him some good to write down his thoughts. He extinguished the light, stuck his hand in his trunk, and pulled out a quill and ink.

September 1st 1992, he wrote

Suddenly, the words disappeared, and words appeared on the page.

I don't work like that.

Harry frowned, surprised. He dipped his pen in ink and wrote:

Well, I've never met a diary that talks back.

I'm not an ordinary diary, appeared on the page. Harry got the idea that if it had been spoken aloud, there would have been an undertone of smugness.

Obviously

So now that you know that I'm special, do you still want to use me. I assure you, I can help you on a great many things.

Well, it would help by telling me who made you. Because you seem to have an actual personality.

I'm basically the personality of a sixteen-year old boy named Tom Marvolo Riddle. Harry had inkling to ask someone if they'd ever heard of him, but something told him it wasn't necessary.

My name's Harry. Harry Potter. A second after he wrote this, he wondered if it was best to reveal this. But Tom didn't react in any special way.

Pleased to meet your acquaintance, Harry. Where are you right now?

I'm at Hogwarts. I'm a second year in Slytherin.

A Fine House indeed. I too was Slytherin. Most believed that as a half-blood, I was unworthy.

Harry grinned. Maybe he'd finally found another boy who might understand what he had gone through.

Well, I come from a family of Gryffindors, a light family. And a lot of students think the Slytherins are all Dark.

Yes, I've heard of the Potters before.

You have?

Yes. I know a great deal about family. You learn a lot in Slytherin. So people ostracized you?

Yes.

I know a great deal about that. For while I had roots in an ancient pureblooded family, Slytherin, of course, I was born a half-blood. My father left my mother, and she herself died giving birth. I grew up in an orphanage.

Well, I lost my parents too. They were murdered by a Dark Wizard named Lord Voldemort. I've lived with my mother's best friend, who used to be an Auror. She's a powerful witch.

Then you know what it's like. To wish for guidance and aid, and to not have your parents to ask for advice and comfort. I've never really known love.

Well, I've been really lucky. Daphne Dressler, the woman that raised me, loves me as much as life itself. She cares a lot about me and my happiness.

I'm glad for you, Harry. So, do you have many friends?

Well, I've got a few back home. We live in Newfoundland. I know an Auror Trainee named Tonks who is like an older sister. And my best friend is a Gryffindor girl named Hermione.

Interesting. A Slytherin, ostracized by the rest of the school, befriended by a Gryffindor. Obviously, you choose your friends well.

Well, I had to save her life to get her to talk to me. It took off from there.

You saved her life?

I distracted a mountain troll that got into Hogwarts, and got hit by the club in the process. She felt guilty and tried to get to know me, and we both got along very well.

I wouldn't recommend making anymore friends like that. Being hit by a troll's club will take a toll after a while.

Harry laughed. I'd say so. It's getting late, I need to be ready for school.

I wouldn't dream of interfering in learning. Goodnight, Harry.

Goodnight, Tom.

It hadn't been easy, but Tom Marvolo Riddle had done it.

He had established the connection. As long as Harry kept writing in the diary, he would be able to possess him completely, without the boy's knowledge. However, two things had surprised him about the boy.

First, he claimed to have been orphaned by a person bearing the name he used only among his closest followers, such as Evan Rosier and Roland McCourn. In all likelihood, the mysterious Dark Wizard was the future version of himself.

But if that was the case, why wasn't the boy concerned about the possibility of danger from his future self. He seemed to write as if it was long in the past.

As if he had been defeated.

There was also the matter of his guardian, Daphne Dressler. He knew the Dressler name, they were a Light-dominated pureblood family. She was either a female heir or had married into the line.

Most importantly, she was an ex-Auror, and Harry had another friend who was in the training program. In all likelihood, he was very sharp. While Tom had been able to suppress the desire to find out about the diary or tell others, the speed at which the thought entered his host's mind seem to confirm his theory.

Speaking of which, the boy had a number of natural mental defenses. He either was born with them, or had repeatedly been exposed to Legillimacy from a young age. He'd have to find out more about the boy's guardian. He also needed to know if Albus Dumbledore was Headmaster. He had been on the track at the time, and the man never let Tom out of his sight. He'd have to tread carefully.

But for Tom Marvolo Riddle, a.k.a. Lord Voldemort, nothing was impossible. After all, despite the boy's mental resistance, he'd established the link that would allow him to possess the boy.

He wondered absently if Myrtle, that whining mudblood, had returned as a ghost.

It would be just like her.

Chapter 5: Challenging a Legend

Harry lay awake the next morning, thinking about the ‘conversation’ he had had with the diary. Tom was interesting, and seemed to be quite like himself. He seemed to have an understanding of exactly what Harry had gone through. It seemed the boy had been even more unlucky than Harry in some areas. At least Harry had been raised by a woman who deeply loved him. Tom had grown up in an orphanage.

Harry pulled himself out from under the covers and unlocked the curtains with a sleepy “Andromeda.” He showered, changed into his robes, and headed downstairs. The sight that met him was hardly surprising, but perhaps he had simply hoped it would happen.

Sure enough, Ginny Weasley was sitting alone in the empty common room, staring into the fire, her face tracked with tears. Her hair was disheveled, and she was still in her robes from the previous night. Harry checked his watch to see that it was 6:30. He silently crept down and then plunked down in the chair next to hers. Ginny started violently, jumping almost a foot in the air.

“*Harry!*” she gasped, turning a furious crimson and ducking her face in shame. Harry reached out and grabbed her shoulder, gently pulling her back up so that she was eye to eye with him. Her lip was trembling, and Harry could see the dark bags under her eyes. If Harry had been a scarless, red-headed girl, it would have been impossible to tell his reflection from before Halloween the previous year and Ginny’s current appearance apart.

“This looks familiar,” he said sadly. Ginny frowned.

“What?”

“I was just thinking that if I had your features, it would have been impossible to tell what I looked like before I met Hermione, just before Halloween, and yourself apart.”

“Huh?”

“Ginny, what I’m saying is that you shouldn’t be ashamed of how you are reacting. Because I did the same thing.”

“You...you cried yourself to sleep? Thought everyone hated you? Wished it was all...a bad dream.” Harry nodded.

“Oh...”

“Ginny, it’s not that bad. I like you, I think you are a bright girl. (She turned a deeper crimson, which Harry ignored) I think Hermione feels the same way. Do you know that Lovegood girl?” Harry asked, trying to find positives to cheer up the young redhead.

“Well...I knew her before her mother died. But she’s so...so...*strange* now. She was just babbling on about non-existent things.”

“How about Grunitch?” Harry asked. He remembered how the girl had helped Ginny up to the Dormitory.

“Anne...I don’t really know her...”

“Ginny, you’ll be alright. They aren’t mad at *you* anyway. It’s hardly your fault! Ron’s the only one mad about anything, and he’s mad at *me!*” Harry exclaimed, trying to make the girl see sense.

“I just wonder about my parents...”

“What? You think they’ll disown you or something? Ginny, that’s ridiculous.”

“I know it is. But still...”

“Then write to them,” Harry said. “And write to anyone else that you know and trust.”

“Well,” Ginny admitted. “Bill’s my oldest brother, and the coolest...he’d probably know what to do.”

Harry grinned. “And you can tell him you are friends with Harry Potter.”

Ginny blushed fiercely. "Ginny, it's nothing to be embarrassed about. I'll help you get through this because I don't want to see you go through what I did. You have people here for you."

"I...thanks Harry. Thanks so much!" she cried, a smile lighting her features. Harry thought her childish glee was rather cute. He only hoped that her good mood would last.

"Go upstairs and take a shower, get dressed. You are a mess, you know."

"I know," she said embarrassedly.

"Ginny, remember, you have nothing to be ashamed of. I don't want you to base *all* of your judgments of people off of me, but I never cried before like I did last year. I've always had good control of my emotions. Finding Hermione was the best thing that ever happened to me...well, maybe Daphne taking me away, letting me grow up normally. I didn't even know what I'd done until I was ten. It was best that way, I think."

"Wow."

"Ginny, go get cleaned up. I'll wait for you."

Without another word, Ginny jumped off the chair and bounded up the stairs. Harry shook his head and slumped into the chair.

"Are you *sure* you don't have a thing for her?"

"Are you aware that eavesdropping is considered rude, Zabini?" Harry answered without glancing back.

"Yes, but I do it anyway. Excellent blackmail material."

"You don't want to know what I'll do to you if you leak what you heard to Malfoy. I'll probably be expelled."

"Sorry, Harry. I respect your privacy, and Weasley's. I won't say anything. Sounds like you had it rough though."

"I'm not talking about it."

"Fine. See you at breakfast, Potter."

He left. Twenty minutes later, a tired looking, but perfectly groomed Draco Malfoy, flanked by his half-asleep bodyguards. He grinned nastily at Harry as he approached.

"Drove off your girl, Potter? Bit young for you, don't you think?"

"I'm not going to justify that with a response," Harry said without looking up.

"Oh, so you did drive off your *girlfriend*." The tone with which he said this sounded suspiciously targeted, and he turned around. Ginny was on the opposite staircase, bright red. Harry sent a vicious glare at Malfoy, withdrawing his wand from its holster.

"I'll give you five seconds. One...two...three..."

That was all it took as the three children of Death Eaters bolted from the room. They'd seen the power of Harry's hexes the previous year. They were in no mind to repeat the experience.

Ginny was standing, shaking slightly. Harry sighed. "Come down, Ginny. I don't think of you *that* way, and you *know* it, as much as a part of you *wants* it."

She blushed a deeper crimson, slowly wandering down the stairs. "*That...doesn't...help..*" she ground out. "I'm trying to forget about that."

"It won't be that easy, Ginny. Just remember the boy you have a crush on has never existed. What you see is what you get: a slightly bitter Slytherin with above average power and skill, who can be a right arse when he's in the mind to."

"But...you helped me. You aren't like that at all!"

"Ginny, I'm not perfect. Just remember that."

"I know...we should get down to Breakfast," she said, looking anxiously towards the door. Obviously, she still wasn't that comfortable in her crush's presence. She ran off.

Harry was going to stamp her crush out if it was the last thing he did. He couldn't help but feel a connection to the girl, just as he felt a connection to Tom. But he *couldn't* have a friendship with her if she had a crush on a part of him that didn't exist.

Harry exited the Slytherin Common Room, but didn't see Ginny. He walked up through the dungeons, and when he entered the Entrance Hall, he saw Ron Weasley, Dean Thomas, and Neville Longbottom standing there, obviously waiting for him.

Harry sighed. "Let's get this over with, Weasley."

"Over here, Potter," he said, indicating an empty classroom in the corridor leading to the Great Hall. Harry entered the room and walked to the other side, slumping lazily against the stone.

"How may I serve you, Weasley?" he drawled in his best imitation of Draco Malfoy.

"Cut the crap, Potter," Weasley snapped impatiently. "What did you do to my sister?"

"What? Besides comforting her when you rejected her, you mean?"

"You know what I mean!" he barked, turning bright red. Harry chuckled, which seemed to annoy him even more. He balled his fingers into a fist and began to draw it back.

Harry prepared to dodge, but didn't visibly flinch. "That's a bad idea, Weasley. And you know it."

"SO WHAT! YOU...YOU CORRUPTED MY SISTER! MADE HER A BLOODY SLYTHERIN!"

"Hermione was riding in the car too," Harry pointed out. "I simply showed her that she needed to have an open mind."

“Open mind my arse! You...*Bastard!*” Weasley drew back his fist.

“*Percutio!*” Harry cast, his wand sliding out from his wrist holster. The purple light hit Weasley in the midsection and sent him crashing to the opposite side of the room. Harry stood there, his eyes flashing dangerously. Dean and Neville looked on in fear.

“*You’re* the bastard, Weasley,” he snarled, a red glint momentarily flickering in his eyes. “You’re the one who’s abandoned your *sister*, your own flesh and blood.” He clenched his teeth. “I’d *die* to have a family like yours, Ron. Because as much as I love Daphne and care about Hermione, she isn’t my mother, and she isn’t my sister. *Cherish* what you have Ronald. You *never* know when it will be taken from you.”

He spun around on his heel and marched out of the room, trying to calm his raging temper. And trying to figure out why he was reacting so strongly. “Stay away from her, Potter!” Ron yelled as Harry left. But there was a tremor in his voice. Harry ignored him.

Harry entered the bustling Great Hall and scanned the massive room to find his two friends. Conveniently, he saw them both sitting at the Ravenclaw Table. Ginny was laughing at something Luna Lovegood had said, while Luna looked puzzled as to why what she had said was funny. Hermione appeared to be deep in conversation with Mandy Brocklehurst about something involving O.W.L. Level charms. Harry took a seat next to Hermione and Terry Boot.

“Morning Terry.”

The black-haired boy looked up. “Morning Harry. Did you sleep well?”

“Alright...” Harry attention was distracted by the *last* person Harry had expected to see at the Head Table. Gilderoy Lockhart, dressed in bright yellow robes, was chatting cheerfully with Severus Snape, who looked murderous. “When the hell did that dandy become a teacher?”

“Huh?” Terry replied. He followed Harry’s gaze. “Lockhart? It was announced at the Feast. Weren’t you paying any attention?”

"I guess not. I was trying to help Ginny."

"Why'd you call him a dandy? I think he's a great wizard, if a bit full of himself."

"He's a blood fraud," Harry said. Terry looked shocked.

"*What?*"

The voice didn't come from Terry though. It came from Hermione.

"How can you call him a *fraud*? Did you even *read* the books?" she demanded angrily, her cheeks tinted with pink. *Yup, she's got a crush on him.*

"Because Daphne knew him at Hogwarts. And said that he couldn't hold a wand straight, much less defeat a thousand trolls or whatever the hell he claims to do. All his lies kind of ran together as I was reading them."

"So, because *Daphne* says so, that means she's right? Is she *ever* wrong?"

"She'd *destroy* him in a duel," Harry growled through his teeth. "Why don't you *get* it? He's a bloody *fake*!"

"Life isn't all about duels, Harry," she snapped back. "Maybe my parents were right."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Harry asked, his tone dangerous. "What's that supposed to mean, Hermione?"

"It means...I don't know..." she said. "I'm sorry, that was out of line. But I don't believe you, and I think you have too much faith in your aunt at times."

"You think you know better? I'm good at reading people Hermione, and I learned everything I know from her."

"Harry, stop it," Ginny said, speaking up in defense of her fellow female. "This is getting you nowhere. Why don't you wait for an actual

class before judging him.” Suddenly, she turned red, as if remembering who she was speaking to.

“None of that, Ginny. *He doesn’t exist.*”

“What?” Hermione asked.

“Harry’s trying to obliterate my crush by both constantly reminding me of it and showing me how messed up he is.”

Hermione stared. “Well...that’s one approach...”

Harry began attacking his food. “Someone’s hungry,” Terry commented.

He looked up at him. “Someone didn’t have full use of his hands during dinner last night.” It was the wrong thing to say, as Ginny blushed fiercely, ducking her head in shame.

“*Harry!*” Lisa scolded. She put an arm around the redhead and glared at him.

Harry did his best to look ashamed, for Ginny’s benefit. That had been a rather stupid thing to say. “I’m sorry, Ginny.”

“It’s...okay,” she said, wiping away a couple of small tears. She smiled through them. “I guess I did kind of treat you like my mum.”

“I figured it was something like that,” Harry said aloud. Hermione beamed at him.

“Well, that was nice of you, Harry.”

“It was nothing...” he said, trying not to reveal the real reason he had tolerated it. He really didn’t like to talk about his early-year problems, even with Hermione. Especially not when the entire Ravenclaw table was listening. The bell rang.

“What do you have first, Ginny?” Harry asked. The redhead checked her time table.

“Transfiguration. With McGonagall. I’ve heard she’s really strict.”

"She's not that bad," Hermione said. "Just follow directions and you'll get along fine."

"She wasn't that fond of me," Harry said, remembering how the Head of Gryffindor hadn't given him a friendly look until she found him gazing mindlessly into the Mirror of Erised.

"She warmed up to you in the end. She knew your parents and Daphne, and was just surprised that you weren't Sorted into Gryffindor."

They got up from the table, and Harry waited until Ginny was gone until he started talking again. He waved Terry, Lisa, and Mandy on, and Terry nodded his head in understanding.

"Hermione, I didn't do anything to earn her ire. For *disappointment*, she seemed damned bitter. Remember that first class? When I matched you on the needle? She tried to ignore my progress, and then grudgingly rewarded me. She didn't even give me any help or sympathy when it was clear I was crying out for some. Didn't she ever wonder why she never saw me with anyone? Why I was always alone?"

"Harry," she said, tears glazing her eyes. "A lot of people made mistakes in judging you, myself included. You can't hold it against them."

"*Oh really?*" he asked darkly. *An image of a dead McGonagall and Weasley, their bodies pale and lifeless on the castle floor, their eyes gaping black holes, suddenly appeared in his mind.* He blinked.

"Harry?"

"I...I'm fine," he said, his voice quavering. *What was that?*

Revenge.

"So what class do we have anyway?" Harry asked as he walked up a few staircases. The strange vision of his dead teacher and rival had

unnerved him. "I assume we're going together. If we aren't, I'm in big trouble."

"Defense, of course. Slytherins with Gryffindors, not sure whose bright idea that was. Didn't you read your time table?"

"I didn't get one," Harry said. "I'll stop by McGonagall's office to pick it up later."

"I thought you didn't like her," Hermione replied, confused.

"She's civil enough. I like her better than say... *Snape*."

"Oh, that's a high standard... Well, we're here."

They had indeed arrived at the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Harry pushed the door open. The room was quite different from the dark, garlic and other vampire-repulsive item-filled classroom that Quirrell had preferred. Harry knew that the fear of vampires had been entirely manufactured as part of Quirrell's nervous act, but nonetheless, the change to a bright, sunny room, the walls covered by numerous pictures of Gilderoy Lockhart in all of his disgusting glory.

The original was standing in front of the class, his blond so shiny it looked polished, his teeth glinting in the sunlight, and his eyes sparkling mischievously. Harry heard a sigh from behind him, and stomped on Hermione's foot.

"OW! What was that-" Harry gave her a knowing look, and she turned red. *Yup, she had it bad...*

"Hello class! Please, take a seat," the blond fraud said in an over dramatic tone, gesturing to a couple of seats close to him. Harry shot him an incredulous look, and the fool seemed to remember he was addressing the ward of the woman who had pointed her wand at his jugular.

Harry dragged Hermione to where Zabini and Greengrass were sitting. Nott was absent, and Harry inquired as to why.

"Ate something that disagreed with him. Pomfrey's got him laid up in the Hospital Wing. You just going to stand there until the grass grows?" the Greengrass heiress drawled. Hermione looked offended, but Harry was used to it. He took a seat next to Zabini, and Hermione sat next to him.

Lockhart walked up to the front of the class, then pointed at himself. "Me. Author, Famed Wizard. Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League-" Harry snorted.

"Is something *amusing*, Mr. Potter?" he said in a rather cold voice, his façade vanishing.

"That you pride yourself in being a member of an organization made up primarily of people that *failed* to qualify for the Aurors," Harry replied evenly. Something dangerous flashed in Lockhart's blue eyes. Harry didn't flinch, giving him a triumphant smirk. *This guy was a Slytherin alright.*

His smile replaced, Lockhart sought to salvage the situation. It was difficult, because most of the boys in the class were looking at Harry in awe and admiration, while the girls, including Hermione and excluding Greengrass, who looked as uncaring as ever, were sending him death glares.

"-Ah, yes, but still, *great* wizards such as Joseph Englemore were founding members-" Harry gaped at him, shaking his head.

"Is there something you would *like* to say, Mr. Potter?" Lockhart replied with false cheer. Harry abruptly realized how much he could do in this situation. As famous as Lockhart was, he was nothing to the Boy-Who-Lived, or the Grey Maiden, for that matter. Harry had a great deal of sway over the class, the school, the wizarding world even, and Lockhart didn't know how to deal with that. His behavior only confirmed what Harry had known. His fear of being found out confirmed what Harry had known: he was a complete fraud.

"Yes, actually. Englemore was a *Death Eater*. A Death Eater that my guardian put in Azkaban. He *died* there." There were several gasps at that statement. Lockhart looked rather irritated, his pleasant façade completely gone. He ground on.

“-Five-Time Winner of Witch-Weekly’s Most Charming Smile Award. Order of Merlin, Second Class-“

Harry coughed something that sounded suspiciously like “*Bollucks!*” Hermione fixed him with her own death glare, while Zabini sniggered, grinning at his Housemate. Even Greengrass gave him a smirk.

Lockhart gave up trying to play himself up, realizing that Harry had torn his reputation to shreds. He plastered another false smile upon his disgustingly bright face, and began handing out ‘quizzes,’ to make sure that had read their *textbooks*, which read more like bad romance novels than anything else. Daphne wasn’t a bookworm, but saying she had nearly burnt a book meant something.

Harry began reading the quiz.

1. In your opinion, what is Gilderoy Lockhart’s greatest accomplishment to date?

Harry smirked, he’d asked for it. *Fooling the wizarding world into believing you know how to hold a wand straight.*

He continued to fill out the exercise in ego-gratification, inserting smart remarks whenever he could. He knew that he’d unnerved the idiot considerably. Putting his knowledge in writing could only serve to increase that fear. And that would give Harry leverage.

Harry hadn’t had the chance to truly explore his Slytherin quantities, but he found himself quite cunning and devious indeed. This was just one example. He couldn’t wait to get some huge dirt on Weasley.

An image of Ron screaming as a Dementor drew close filled his mind. Harry jerked back in surprise. What was wrong with him?

Shaking it off as his mind on overdrive, he filled out the remainder of the quiz (correctly, of course; he’d forced himself to read the garbage so that his marks wouldn’t suffer.)

Once everyone had filled out the quiz and handed it in, grumbling at how ridiculous it was, Lockhart announced to the class that Hermione, of course, had answered all 54 questions correctly. Harry sighed.

Lockhart paled a bit as he also announced that Harry had been beaten by only one. The first one. Harry sent Lockhart a look clearing saying that he was the one who was right, and Gilderoy knew it.

“Well, after that little exercise, we’ve got the rest of a double period to fill up! I’m going to give you a bit of a challenge.”

He walked over to his desk, where a cage covered by a green cloth was sitting, and brought it to his table in front of the room. “Be quiet now, you might *provoke* them!” he cried dramatically, yanking the cover off the cage, to reveal a cage full of...pixies.

Seamus Finnegan snorted. “Pixies!”

“Ah, Mr. Finnegan...freshly caught Cornish Pixies. Trick little blighters they are.”

Harry wasn’t sure where this was going. Knowing this idiot, he probably let them out to trash the classroom and leave his class to handle them.

Harry was too smart for his own good sometimes.

“See what you make of them,” he said, opening the cage. The results were predictable.

Freed of their containment, the magical household pests began causing all manner of mayhem. They flew it a neat stack of Lockhart books and began tearing them to shreds. Others began grabbing random objects and throwing them out the window. Lockhart dove under his desk after a pitiful attempt at an advanced creature control spell that only the best trained handlers could execute. He was quickly deprived of his wand. Students began swatting at the pixies with textbooks, rolls of parchment, anything they could get their hands on.

Meanwhile, Harry and Hermione were being a bit more efficient in dealing with the pests. Harry was picking them off with individual low-power stunners, while Hermione was using Freezing Charms to stop them in midair. One flew at Harry and clawed at his face, and after it

flew away, Harry angrily blew it to pieces with a Blasting Hex. A few screams broke out at the pixie blew apart.

The two were joined by Zabini and Greengrass, both of whom knew enough spells to bring them down. Harry and Hermione stuffed them roughly into the cage. Harry walked over to where Lockhart was cowering.

"You can come out now, Gilderoy," Harry whispered. "The pixies have been dealt with, and your incompetence revealed for all to see." Lockhart glared daggers at the twelve-year old.

"I ought to put in detention for a month for your insolence, young man," he began pompously.

"But you won't. Because if you do, then I win. You can't win this, *Professor*."

Lockhart glared at him. "Get out!"

"As you wish, fraud." Harry spun on his heel in a manner reminiscent of Daphne, and left the room, meeting a bewildered Hermione.

"Harry, what were you *doing* in there?" she all but screamed at him. Harry flinched.

"I don't...I wanted to put him in his place, but...I don't know..."

"Well, look, I believe you that he's a fraud now. That he couldn't handle of bunch of pixies is evidence of that, and I must admit, it's suspicious that all of his successes were outside of the country. He's never done anything in front of anyone who's willing to give eyewitness accounts. But what you did in there was *dangerous!*"

Harry shrugged. He wasn't sure what had come over him. He needed to write to Tom, he was all messed today.

"Seriously, Harry, do you honestly believe that if he's really a fraud, that no one has ever suspected him? How do you think he dealt with them? Honestly, I know you Slytherins are all into this game of one-

upmanship, but you can't do that with a teacher! You could get suspended!" What she was saying suddenly started to make sink in.

"I know," he said weakly. "I don't know what came over me, Hermione. Let's get to class, my mind's a mess today, I keep getting these weird flashes and images."

"What kind of images?" Hermione asked, concerned.

"Nothing to worry about," Harry lied. She seemed to be skeptical.

"Should you see Madam Pomfrey?" she asked, "Because I don't know, you did take four Cruciatus Curses as an eleven-year old."

Harry stopped. "You're saying I'm mentally unbalanced?"

"NO!" Hermione cried, a bit too loudly. "I'm just worried about you, Harry. I mean, you've come through the whole thing a bit too well. I'm just wondering if you are hiding lingering damage."

"I'm *fine*, Hermione," Harry ground out. "Stop worrying."

They arrived early for their Transfiguration Class, and Harry sat down to rest and try to think over what was going on while they waited for their classmates to arrive. Hermione was having a conversation with her Head of House. The rest of the Gryffindors and Slytherins wandered in. They had these two classes and Potions together. Herbology was again with the Hufflepuffs, and Charms and Astronomy with the Ravenclaws.

Predictably, Weasley and Thomas were the first to arrive, despite the fact that third member of the trio, Neville Longbottom, had arrived ten minutes prior. Today's was a strange lesson, to say the least. Their task was to Transform rodents, mostly mice, into water goblets. It was a very difficult spell, though transforming animals into inanimate objects was far simpler than making cross-species Transfiguration, a topic not taught for quite some time.

Harry and Hermione, as usual, had the most luck. While little to none of his mother's charms talent had been transferred to her son, Harry

had inherited some of his father's talent with Transfiguration. Of course, Harry's strongest area was something that he picked up from Daphne: skill and use of combat curses and hexes. Weasley created a crime against nature: a furry goblet with a head and tail. McGonagall had to try several times to fix the poor thing, which ran away as soon as it was able.

After class, they headed to lunch, and Ginny told them about her first day of classes. Luna did too, but she was so vague that it was difficult to determine anything other than the fact that she had Transfiguration and Charms. Ginny also mentioned a boy who seemed rather fond of Harry and tried to latch onto her like a leach. It surprised Harry to find out it was Colin Creevey, a Gryffindor.

As for the classes themselves, it'd mostly been introductory work, and Ginny hadn't made any progress with the matchstick, something that seemed to have discouraged her. Harry told her he'd help her with her technique that night.

After lunch, Harry bid Hermione farewell and headed down to Herbology. He caught up with Zabini and Greengrass on the way there. Nott was still absent. It turned out to be probably the most interesting class in the subject he'd had so far with the Hufflepuffs.

After they had entered the greenhouse, they had been given earmuffs, something that had been a bit confusing to Harry. Professor Spout had then explained that they would be repotting Mandrakes today, and explained about the fatal cry of the plants. Harry knew most of it already. Mandrakes had been one plant that had really fascinated Trish. Ironically, another had been the Devil's Snare, the plant that had nearly killed Harry the previous year.

Harry ended up pairing with a Hufflepuff he didn't know, who turned out to be Justin Finch-Fletchely. He was as disgusted with the hideous babies as Harry was. They grimaced and managed to pot all of their assigned mandrakes before the period ended.

After getting cleaned up, Harry ate dinner with his friends and then decided to do something he'd been waiting all day for.

He practically ran into his dormitory after wishing Ginny and Hermione a rather short goodbye and unlocked his trunk. Locking the curtains, he pulled out a quill, dipped it in ink, and began to write.

Hello Tom.

Hello Harry. How was your first day of school?

Interesting.

How so?

Well, our DADA teacher is a complete fraud, and I had a hell of a time convincing my friend of the fact. His name's Gilderoy Lockhart, and he's published dozens of books talking about his 'adventures.' It's all garbage.

Interesting, I can say I felt a number of my teachers were incompetent, but this reaches a new low. What Headmaster allowed this?

Albus Dumbledore. I don't like him that much, he's far too biased towards the Gryffindors and a bit manipulative, but even this seems improbable for him.

Dumbledore, eh? He was my Transfiguration teacher.

Really? When did you go to school?

The 1940s. It is 1992 now, correct?

Yes. September 2nd, 1992.

Ah, thank you. I haven't been written in for so long, it's difficult to keep time.

Speaking of which, do you have any idea where you came from?

I do not know. I am not aware of the world around me.

Oh, that's too bad. I'm not saying I regret it or anything, but I'd like to know why you mysteriously appeared in my trunk.

Does it really matter?

Well, I'd like to know where you came from. Plus, Daphne wouldn't like me to trust something that I don't know about.

I'll never surrender your secrets, Harry. It's just very nice to have someone to talk to. Never mind someone who understands me so well.

The feeling's mutual.

So how was the rest of your day.

Well, I was having this argument with Hermione, my best friend. And I well, saw these images.

Go on.

They were rather disturbing, actually. There is this kid, Ron Weasley, who I really don't like.

Why exactly?

He made my life hell last year. He was bitter that I wasn't Sorted into Gryffindor like him, and spread all of these awful rumors. I threatened him a couple of times, which seemed to spurn him on. I was very lonely last year, until Hermione finally got to know me.

I understand. In my day, being a half-blooded Slytherin was very looked down upon. No one wanted to associate with this penniless orphan. I didn't have any friends for quite some time. I occupied my time trying to excel in classes and learn as much as I could.

Sounds familiar. At least I had Daphne to write.

Do not feel sorry for me, Harry. I became a great wizard by the time I wrote this. I'm afraid I don't know what became of me after that. Still, I am eternally grateful to you for giving me something to do. I may be a diary, but my creator gifted me with the intelligence that you are speaking with. An intelligence capable

of independent thought. That should tell you how much my creator achieved.

I'd say so.

Quite. Now, tell me more about this Daphne. She seems to mean quite a bit to you.

She does. She took me from the ruins of my house after my parents were killed. She gave me a home, a mother, and a life outside of all the "Boy-Who-Lived" nonsense.

"Boy-Who-Lived?"

If I tell you, promise not to treat me differently.

I promise, Harry.

Well, when I was a year old, Voldemort came for my parents and me. After he killed dad, he tried to get my mother to give me up. He killed mum, and somehow, it created a type of ancient magic that used her own magic to protect me, a protection that exists to this day.

Go on.

The short form is that Voldemort cast the Killing Curse at me, and I survived. The curse rebounded onto him, and destroyed his body. Somehow, he also survived, but was so weak that the war was basically over. The whole wizarding world celebrated the downfall of the Dark Lord, but Daphne whisked me away, to give me a chance at a normal childhood.

That was very intelligent of her. Children are very impressionable. It's best to grow up normally if possible.

Yes. She finally told me 'who' I was when I was ten. I'm glad she waited.

You love her very much, don't you?

Of course. She's an amazing witch, and a living legend. Her nickname is the Grey Maiden, and she's known everywhere for things such as killing Evan Rosier.

She seems like quite the celebrity.

What's ironic is that I'm more famous, and I've done much less.

People are very stupid sometimes. They judge without thinking.

Yes, they do. I love Daphne though. She was my mum's best friend, and would do anything to protect me. She's very strange sometimes, and has a rather Dark Past. But she'd never do anything to hurt me.

Are you sure?

Of course I'm sure!

Alright, I'm sorry Harry. Forgive me, but if something happened to you, I don't fancy waiting another fifty years for human contact. Perhaps you ought to get some rest.

That sounds like a good idea. Goodnight Tom.

Goodnight, Harry.

Inside the diary, Tom Marvolo Riddle began to attempt to process the veritable gold mine of information that he had received from his victim. It appeared that the compulsions and suggestions he'd implanted were working well. He was still frustrated by his ability to access the majority of the boy's memories.

He'd discovered something crucial. This twelve-year old child had been his downfall. He'd somehow overlooked Old Magic, and in his haste, he had lost everything. It sounded like he'd been damn close to taking over.

So Dumbledore still was at the school, and Headmaster no doubt. Perhaps he'd been a bit aggressive in affecting Harry's behavior. It

wouldn't do for this Granger girl to report him. A thorough Legillimency scan would detect his presence. He'd have to hide deep within the boy's barriers, but first, he'd have to make Harry trust him more than he already did.

His suggestions to that effect were working beautifully, taking advantage of the boy's loneliness and desire for male companionship. Boys sometime needed other boys to talk to, no matter how interesting and understanding their female friend were at times.

This Dressler was intriguing. She'd killed his second-in-command, Evan Rosier. At least, Tom imagined at the time that Evan was. Evan was a year below him, but at the time of the creation of the diary, was his most trusted confidant. She seemed to be a legend among the Aurors, powerful, skilled, and intelligent. He'd have to tread lightly around her indeed. He also suspected that she had been the one probing him on occasion from a young age, creating the mental shields that had only recently matured enough to block a casual scan, and make deep intrusion difficult.

So, he'd discovered one thing. His plan of draining the boy's life force wasn't going to work. If he was correct, he'd likely obliterate the both of them if he attempted to take the energies of a person protected against him specifically by Old Magic. Protection so powerful it had blocked an unblockable curse. Thus, he'd need another victim. He needed a plan.

In the meantime, he need to build his relationship with Harry, and implant more of himself into the boy. He needed to make his mind trust him, so that he could take over when the time was right. He would indeed proceed with his plan of attacking mudbloods until an opportunity presented itself to return to body. He hoped it would be only a week or so before he could begin the process of re-opening the Chamber of Secrets. He'd need to kill all the roosters (he couldn't comprehend how such a mighty beast could be felled by a sound), and then open the Chamber itself. All of this without arousing suspicion from Harry, Dumbledore, or any of the students.

A challenge indeed.

Chapter 6: A Night Not Remembered

If there was one thing that Harry could say about his friendship with Ginny, it was that it had prevented what he'd tried to prevent. She never did have to go through the loneliness and depression that plagued the first two months of his life at Hogwarts.

Interestingly enough, as Harry had hoped Fred and George had finally become accustomed to the fact that their little sister took up residence in the dungeons. Percy was still rather cold to his little sister, and seemed to be spending a great deal of time with a blond-haired Ravenclaw Prefect. Ron was an arse as usual. Apparently he was spewing some garbage about Harry turning into Voldemort when he had accosted him. Harry had been desperately searching for some dirt on Weasley.

One thing that the Twins' renewal of friendly relations with Ginny was that Harry got a chance to talk with them without threatening them or being threatened in the process. Harry found his earlier guesses being confirmed, the two *were* geniuses. Their marks were rather ordinary, but they would have been at the top of their class had they not spent late nights plotting their next prank or experimenting with new prank ideas. Harry had been the victim of a few of their pranks the previous year, but they appeared to be inclined to find other victims. Whether this was the result of Ginny's friendship or Harry's reputation was unclear.

Harry had continued to spend time with Ginny, helping her out in the Common Room after curfew on homework, or just talking to her when she had problems. She had taken his advice, and it had turned out to be golden. While her parents were shocked at the Sorting Hat's choice, they pointed out a number of people they liked who had been Slytherins. They had assured her that they loved her dearly, and Ron had gotten a Howler for his efforts to pry Harry and Ginny apart. Apparently, Ginny had mentioned that she was friendly with the boy.

Still, it was a shock to Harry when an old, bedraggled looking owl crash-landed on the Slytherin table at breakfast one day. It was one of the rare days they dared to have Hermione sit at the Slytherin table, and she extricated the poor thing from assorted student's breakfasts.

Ginny had identified the owl as Errol, and said he'd been in their family for generations. Malfoy had sneered and made a comment about the Weasley's lack of money, but a glare from Harry had silenced him. It had also made everyone around him a bit nervous. He'd asked Hermione about it before, but she'd denied there was anything odd. Tom had no suggestions either.

Ginny untied a pair of letters from the owl, which had to flap its wings several times to gain altitude, then tiredly flew out the open owl window. She gasped.

"Harry, one's for you," she said. Harry stared.

"What?"

"Mum...or dad maybe, wrote a letter to you. There's one to me to. I sort of...I sort of mentioned that we were friends..."

"That's fine Ginny," Harry assured her. He frowned. He didn't think that the Weasleys would write to *him*. It wasn't a Howler, at least.

Shrugging, Harry took the note and opened it.

Dear Harry Potter,

I'm sure you are quite surprised to read this, but I felt that I should write to express my deepest gratitude for helping Ginny adjust to life at Hogwarts. I must admit that I was shocked to hear that she'd been placed in your House, and a bit worried as well. However, her first letter to me (which I thank you for encouraging her to write) calmed my fears a fair bit.

I must admit that I was surprised to hear she had befriended you, as she is a rather shy girl, and as you know, had a bit of a thing for you. I was quite disturbed to hear my children's reactions to her Sorting, and appalled to hear about Ronald's behavior towards you. I found out about it this summer, and dealt with it, but the full extent of it did not reach me. I am sincerely sorry about how you were treated, and I must say I like your guardian quite a bit from our time during the first war.

Thank you very much for helping my daughter,

Molly Weasley

“What does it say, Harry?” Ginny and Hermione asked simultaneously.

Harry shrugged, “It’s not exactly what I expected.” He handed the letter to them. Hermione beamed as she read it, and Ginny turned bright red.

“It’s okay, Ginny. It’s nothing I didn’t already know.”

“But she doesn’t *know* that! And she makes me sound like some kind of lost, helpless little girl!” Ginny ranted.

“Ginny, forgive for saying so, but that is *exactly* what you were,” Hermione commented. “I think it’s very nice that her parents wrote this. They do seem to like you a bit.”

“What does Bill think of me?” Harry asked curiously.

“He says he wants to meet you...he um, he said that I should try to think of you as just a friend.”

“Sounds like I should meet him too. We think alike.”

“He’s really brilliant,” Ginny said. “He was Head Boy and had top marks. He works as a Curse Breaker for Gringotts.”

“Really? That’s amazing! Gringotts doesn’t have many wizard employees. And that’s a tough profession, in some ways, it’s more difficult than a Auror, because you need skill in both Transfiguration and Ancient Runes.”

“He had Outstandings in both,” she said proudly.

“I’ve met your other brother, didn’t see much of him, though,” Harry said absently. Ginny was flabbergasted.

“*What?* When did you meet Charlie? And why didn’t he tell us?”

Harry winced. It wouldn't do well to discuss the particulars at the Slytherin Table. "I'll explain later."

While the second-year curriculum was more challenging than First Year, Harry and Hermione's excellent study habits ensured they did their work exceptionally well and always handed it in on time. Or rather, on the rare occasions that Harry wasn't on top of his work, Hermione *forced* him to do it completely and thoroughly while getting it done on time.

As a result, Harry had resumed his time spent in the library trying to improve his arsenal of spells. The problem was that the vast majority of powerful curses, hexes, and shields were far beyond their level, and that no matter how knowledgeable Harry was, his magic simply wasn't developed enough to execute the more advanced spells.

Currently, Harry's two research projects involved the Blinding Hex and the Cutting Curse. The latter had two more powerful varieties, the Slicing Curse, like the one that hit Hermione in First Year, and the Severing Curse, which while it didn't always cut clean through the person it hit, still did tremendous damage. The curse was strictly controlled by the ministry, and in the Restricted Section of the Library.

Another variant was the Ripping Curse, which passed through flesh and when executed correctly, could do tremendous internal damage, often resulting in death. Its use could get a person thrown into Azkaban. Harry knew little about it but the name. There was also the Slashing Curse, a rare and powerful version of the Slicing Curse that had been altered by an unknown wizard. It required powerful hate behind it, and also carried a sentence in Azkaban.

While Harry had gotten damn good with his Striking Curse, he was anxious to learn the more powerful version, the Bludgeoning Hex. What was so interesting about it was that the power could be varied rather easily, and one using it could send a person crashing through a wall as easily as knock the wind out of them. The Flinging Hex was another intriguing possibility, but again, it required a wizard's magic to have matured.

Hermione and Ginny had both expressed their concern about Harry's study of offensive magic. Ginny was of the opinion that he really didn't need it, and that there was little point in studying it if you couldn't use it. Hermione was simply concerned that Harry was hiding something.

To placate both of them, Harry had been reading up on Defensive Magic instead. He'd finally mastered the standard Shielding Charm, something that Daphne had told him wasn't surprising for a wizard his age. She'd mentioned that it took far more focus and intent to create and maintain a seamless barrier than it did to discharge a burst of magic as one would a basic hex.

She once again told him that while she'd aid him in his studies, she would *not* teach him advanced magic. She said this for two reasons: first, it was probably more productive for Harry to learn on his own, then refine his spell work with her. Second, most of what she knew Harry would have no prayer of executing. On the topic of wandless magic, Daphne said that while she had become quite good at the rare skill of erecting wandless shields, and could summon small objects, but it was an ability discovered, not obtained through training.

She *did* promise she'd do her best to train him up once his magic had matured.

Restriction Against Underage Wizardry or not.

Tom was an excellent resource. While he agreed with Daphne's assessment of his inability to perform advanced magic, he encouraged his studies, telling Harry that he would need them someday. While Hermione didn't approve of studying illegal curses, she was not averse to practicing what they already knew and trying to master the basis Cutting Curse. She was most concerned that they'd hurt each other in the process. Having no wish to injure the other, they tried to find empty classrooms and use the walls as target practice.

They'd been having a duel with Stunners and Disarming Charms when they had first been discovered. Harry was trying to change Hermione's approach, to teach her to react instead of over thinking. She'd begun to use his approach of settling on a curse she was good

at, and using it until she saw an opening to exploit. It was basic, and Harry still caught her napping sometimes.

The problem was that when one of them was stunned, there was little to do but wait until they woke up. Neither Harry or Hermione had mastered the Revival Charm, a piece of basic Healing Magic. It was also something that could go rather badly if performed wrong, and while it was within their range of magical power, it was on the upper levels.

Harry fired off a Stunner before rolling to the left. Hermione managed to throw up a shield just long and strong enough to block the low-powered Stunner.

She fired back a Disarming Spell, which Harry deflected into the ceiling. He fired back one of his own, and Hermione's wand sailed into his hand. He advanced on her, wand drawn, face determined.

"What are you doing!" a shrill voice cried. Harry and Hermione froze to see a terrified looking Ginny standing in the doorway. Hermione's eyes flashed in understanding.

"It's okay, Ginny," Hermione assured her. "We're just mock dueling. It's the best way to practice, and that wall's been abused enough," she said, gesturing at the stone wall that was crisscrossed with gashes in the masonry.

"What are you practicing?" she asked nervously.

"Nothing Dark, Ginny," Harry said, going after what he figured she was thinking. "Just some basic Stunning and Disarming Charms. And we're working on our shielding charms."

"How long have you been doing this?" she asked nervously.

"For about a month. Harry's been doing this by himself longer."

"I needed to vent, and wanted to do something productive," he answered her questioning glance.

"Oh...okay. Can I join?"

Harry winced. "Well, I don't know." Ginny looked down. "It's not that we don't want you or doubt your ability, but I don't know if it's a good idea to be practicing without your parents' permission."

"Do Hermione's parents know? Does *Daphne* know?"

"Daphne yes, the Grangers no," Harry replied. "But Hermione hasn't revealed a lot to them."

"Can you teach me *something*?" she asked in a pleading voice. Harry could tell she didn't want to be left out.

"Alright," he relented.

"POTTER! Get you lazy arse up there or you'll lose your spot!" Flint bellowed.

Harry ignored the boy who he suspected was half-troll, and lazily drawled back at him. "First, Flint, there's no Snitch up there. Second, there is no competition. What, am I supposed to compete against myself?"

"Don't be stupid, Potter. Malfoy's getting his broom."

Harry stared at him. "*Malfoy*? Don't I embarrass him enough on the *ground*?"

"Ha ha, very funny Potter," Malfoy said, sneering as he emerged from the entrance to the pitch, carrying a Nimbus 2001. "We'll see what happens when that big head of yours drags down your *obsolescent* broom."

Harry stared at him. "Thanks for the prediction, oh might King of Arrogance. Hopefully I'll get a chance to scatter pieces of you all over the pitch, and not even get expelled."

It was that time of year again. As Zabini had reported and Harry had dreaded, the slave-driving Slytherin Quidditch captain had been held back, and was currently attending his eighth year at Hogwarts. Notices that Quidditch tryouts were to be held had gone up three

days ago, and Harry had practiced his neglected talent, flying, for the past three days.

Not that he needed it. His natural ability, combined with years spent flying around the pitch in Claw's Clan, meant that Harry was one of the most polished young flyers Hogwarts had ever seen.

The Slytherin team would actually be formidable this year. Flint and Pucey were returned, and Montague had lost some weight and seemed much more nimble than he ever had been before. Bole and Derrick were back for their final years, and seemed particularly malevolent this year, as if losing the Quidditch Cup to the Lions had been a personal affront.

One position that had needed filling was Keeper. Miles Blechley had graduated, leaving her boyfriend, Flint, behind. The top candidates were Chester Warrington, who admitted his preference was for Chaser. If Montague was slow, Warrington was a sloth. He looked the part too, with long, slender limbs and a large frame. He's was quite a strange looking boy actually. His physical attributes were combined with an eternally blank expression, sort of like Luna Lovegood, but more clueless-looking.

Then again, intelligence wasn't necessary to win Quidditch games. The Slytherins proved that. Without Quirrell's interference, they would have gone undefeated.

Harry mounted his personalized broom, tucking his parent's medal beneath his robes. He glanced up at the Slytherin stands, where Hermione and Ginny, both wearing green Slytherin scarves (Ron had given her hell when he'd seen she actually *owned* one), were excitedly cheering him on. Ginny was watching with a look of longing. Harry guessed she was looking forward to earning her own spot on the team in her second year.

Harry kicked off from the ground, and was air-born. "What do you want me to do, Flint?" Harry asked, making a show of lounging on his broom to annoy Malfoy.

"I'm releasing the Snitch, you dolt. Try to catch it instead of bragging."

“Sounds like a good idea,” Harry drawled back.

Flint let loose the Snitch he'd been mashing in his fist. Harry was off in a flash, intent on losing Malfoy. He banked hard to the right before going into a dive. Again, he weaved and bobbed to simulate chasing a moving Snitch. Malfoy bought it.

He followed him into the dive, and nearly plowed into the ground. Cursing at being taken, Malfoy broke off completely. Harry banked off, and spun his Nimbus around, shooting at his Housemate like a javelin.

The blond-haired boy flew away in alarm, and Harry shot past him, grinning madly.

“You're trying to kill me Potter!” Malfoy cried indignantly.

“That's the idea,” Harry replied lazily. “After all, if you're dead or unable to fly, I win the job, right?”

Malfoy gnashed his teeth and growled angrily. Harry laughed and flew off in pursuit of the Snitch.

He spotted the golden ball after about ten minutes of flying, but decided that he needed to get rid of his tail. Diving at the ground hard, he abruptly twisted to the right inches above the ground and flew sideways just above the grass. Even on his newer broom, Malfoy didn't have nearly the reaction time, and with a dull thump, he hit the ground hard. Harry looked back to see him rolling across the ground, his broom embedded in the pitch. His silvery-blond hair was filthy and disheveled.

Harry resisted the urge to laugh out loud and began searching for the Snitch unimpeded. He noticed that Flint was hovering near the stands, taking notes on a piece of parchment.

As he searched, Malfoy was desperately trying to extricate his broom from the ground. The Nimbus 2001 was buried up to about half way up the handle, and stuck fast. Malfoy, his face red from a combination of anger, embarrassment, and physical exertion, collapsed against his broomstick.

Harry finally found the Snitch near one of the opposite goalposts, and looked back at Malfoy. Taking pity on the boy, and seeking to embarrass him further, he lazily let his wand fall out of his holster and levitated the Nimbus 2001 out of the ground. Then he dumped it in front of the fuming Malfoy heir. Finally, he flew back, picked up the Snitch easily, and made a show of lazily snatching it from the sky. He flew back towards the captain.

"How'd I do, Flint?" he called over lazily. Harry had to admit that acting like a total arse was a hell of a lot of fun.

"How do you think?" he asked sarcastically. "You're on the team, Potter. Malfoy, you're dirtying the pitch. You've already made a hole in it. Get out of my sight."

"When my father finds out about this-" Malfoy began.

"He'll do nothing," a cold voice said. Severus Snape was emerging from the tunnel, a broom in his hand. "Potter was clearly the superior flyer, though I recommend he deflate his head size a bit before it drags him down like his father. Still, I'd rather have the best Seeker in this school on Slytherin and deal with your over inflated ego."

Harry stared at him. That had to be the nicest thing the potion master had ever said to him. He'd actually *complimented* him!

"Speechless, Potter? Amazed that I'd actually say something positive about you? Well, I'm full of surprises, aren't I?" he said to the dumbstruck son of James Potter. "Get along, Potter. Your little friends are waiting for you."

"Practices every Tuesday and Thursday at six, Potter. Be there," Flint called after him.

Harry waved in understanding and ran towards the stands. Ginny came tearing down them, clambering over benches, and tackled him in a fierce hug that knocked the wind out of him. He returned it weakly.

She broke away, face bright red. *"Don't do that again, Harry James Potter! Don't scare me like that!"* she cried, jumping up and down. It was a rather comical sight, actually.

"Ginny, calm down," Hermione said, grabbing the bouncing redhead by the shoulders. She looked up at him. "She does have a point, though. Was that diving really necessary."

"I didn't crash," he protested. Ginny glared at him.

"How does that matter?" Ginny demanded. "Hermione, how are you so calm about this? He could have been *killed* out there!"

"Well, I've seen it before. Honestly, Ginny, he's knows what he's doing. You have to accept that or you'll drive yourself mad," she explained.

On the night of October 10th, Harry dreamed:

He was walking through the Entrance Hall of Hogwarts, his wand drawn, alert for any sign of pursuit. He walked cautiously, though his shoes had Silencing Charms cast upon them, and thus made no noise.

Silently opening the front doors of the castle just enough to sneak through, he began to silently glide across the grounds, eyes scanning the darkness lit only by the full moon looming overhead. A few lights were on in the upper towers, likely belonging to teachers grading work deep into the night. The most important lights, those belonging to the Headmaster's Office, were extinguished. Just to be safe, he crept along the hedges, out of sight until he reached the bridge.

He muttered an incantation and a yellow beam of light shot out of the end of his wand. The bridge was covered in golden web, but no red light, which would indicate the presence of alarm spells, were present on the old structure. He cancelled the spell, and proceeded onwards towards his target.

The lights of the half-giant Gamekeeper were extinguished, and the man appeared to have turned in for the night, most likely after a long night of drinking. In a fenced in area about 20 meters from the back door were his target: the roosters.

Casting a Silencing Charm on the entire area, he picked out a Rooster at random and began to fire away. Cutting Curse after Cutting Curse shot forth from his wand, turning the dozen or so roosters into a mutilated pile of dead birds. Blood spattered his robes...

Harry awoke with a start, as he flung himself up, looking around into the darkness. Concerned about what he had seen, he looked himself over. He was in his pajamas, not blood-spattered robes. His wand was not in his hand, warm from the use of multiple curses. He checked his wand holster, and withdrew the cool wooden wand from it.

"Priori Incantatem," he whispered. A gray ripple indicating a Silencing Charm shot forth before fading.

He'd reinforced the Silencing Charms on his bed before he'd gone to sleep, so that wasn't amiss. He unlocked the curtains, and looked around for his robes. He pulled them inside his four-poster bed and shut the curtains, using a Lighting Charm. They were cool from the cold air of the dungeons, but not a drop of blood or of any strange substance could be found.

It had been a dream. A strange dream, but a dream nonetheless.

Harry relaxed, and went back to sleep.

Inside the diary, Tom Marvolo Riddle grinned. He had killed all of the roosters. It was safe to open the Chamber.

And thanks to his precautions...

He didn't suspect a thing.

Between Marcus Flint trying to kill his team in practice, Snape doing his best to ensure that Harry's potions exploded in his face with lethal

effect, Lockhart's bumbling ineptitude, and Ron Weasleys constant harassment, Harry's first two months at Hogwarts were full of the insane, the predictable, and the plain random.

The 'Golden Idiot,' as Harry had dubbed him, had finally given up trying to teach anything useful after a particularly disastrous attempt at teaching the basic Body-Bind Spell.

Well, disastrous if you were Gilderoy Lockhart.

Harry on the other hand, viewed it as a tremendous success.

Since the disastrous first class, which had convinced Hermione of her crush's idiocy (she still refused to believe she had a crush in the first place), Harry and Hermione had attempted to force the truth out of their DADA Professor.

Lockhart had mostly been reading excerpts from his books, which more and more students appeared to be disgusted with. To make matters worse, he began calling students up to re-enact some of the more 'dramatic' scenes. As part of their efforts, the two had mercilessly pursued every contradiction, overlap, and factual inaccuracy. This goal was attacked in class, out of class, and on the floor of the classroom.

Concerning that latest bit, Lockhart had foolishly called Harry to the front of the class in his re-enactment of his 'defeat' of the Wagga-Wagga Werewolf. While one of his more legendary 'accomplishments,' the writing of it was particularly bad.

From his first words, the lesson had gone badly (and thus been worthwhile in the minds of Harry and Hermione).

"Alright, Harry," he said excitedly, rubbing his hands together. He'd taken to calling him by his first name, something that was not only unprofessional but considered offensive in Slytherin House when the speaker was not on friendly terms with the addressed.

Needless to say, Harry was *not* on good terms with Gilderoy. "So, I want you to stand over there. You'll be playing the monstrous werewolf-"

“Question, Professor?” Hermione asked, her hand waving excitedly.

“Yes, Miss Granger?” he asked in a poisonously sweet voice.

“It says on page 174, detailing the previous night and the horrible attack on that little boy, that it was a full moon. Yet you ‘killed’ the werewolf while it was transformed, the *next* night. How is that possible?”

“Well,” he began nervously. A number of students were frowning, wondering if Hermione had a point. “In that part of the world, atmospheric conditions and such can actually create a full moon on *consecutive nights*.”

Dean Thomas raised his hand. “Yes, Mr. Thomas?”

“Sir, werewolves transform *once* every month. I’m never heard of a werewolf transforming *twice*.”

“Well...anyway, lets get onto the story.” Hermione gave Harry, who was standing across the room, a triumphant grin. He smirked.

“Alright, Ms. Brown, I want you to play the young lady that I rescued. Stand over there, please.” The brown-haired gossip girl practically bounced out of her seat, obviously pleased with the idea of being rescued by the powerful blond wizard. Harry suppressed a snort only with maximum effort.

“So, anyway, Cecilia Travers, the young woman, a beautiful brunette (Lavender sighed, Harry had to force himself not to gag) was cowering in fear...go ahead Ms. Brown.” Lavender began trembling and muttering over dramatically. Someone in the back of the class laughed.

“And the werewolf...that’s you Harry... was towering over her...go ahead.” Harry walked over to Lavender and smirked at her. That caused *real* trembling.

Harry could look menacing even without meaning to. Weasley’s stories of Harry attacking him, and the strange look in his eyes, had spread like wildfire. Thankfully, unlike the previous year, only the

biggest idiots in the school (thus people that Harry, Hermione, and Ginny didn't care about) actually believed him. For as fearsome as Harry could look, simply *being* a member of Slytherin had taught him a number of skills, manipulation and acting innocent among them.

"Look *menacing*, Harry...you know, like you have sharp claws and razor teeth dripping with werewolf venom...Yes Ms. Granger?" he asked irritably.

"Werewolves don't have *venom* sir. Their saliva, once it gets into the bloodstream, is what causes Lycanthropy."

"I know that, Granger," he said tiredly. "I was using poetic license. *Please* don't interrupt again."

"I'm sorry sir," she replied with an incredibly false sweetness. She'd been getting good, just hanging around a pair of Slytherins. "I'm just so excited about your books, and need to make sure I understand them *completely*."

Harry mentally snorted, keeping a straight face only with difficulty. For Hermione to *completely understand* something, she had to dissect it and put it back together again. In other words, there was not the smallest detail that escaped her. It was why she constantly sounded like she swallowed a textbook, she studied them obsessively. Harry tended to learn things by practicing them, after first doing background research.

"Very well, Ms. Granger...now, then, Harry, why aren't you terrorizing her?"

Because Hermione and I are too busy terrorizing you. "Sorry, Professor." Harry stretched his arms high above his head, hooking his fingers into claws. He narrowed his eyes and bared his teeth, tensing his upper body as he leaned over the Gryffindor. Her eyes grew wide with *actual* fear. Harry heard Zabini snicker from the back of the room.

"Excellent, Harry...my, my, are you *sure* you aren't a werewolf?" he asked in jest. *If I was, you'd be my first victim...except that I'd rip out*

your pretty throat rather than curse the werewolf population with your presence.

What? Yes, he wanted Lockhart to be eaten by *something*, but that was a bit *extreme*... His imagination must have been running away from him. Then again, being a werewolf wouldn't do much for Lockhart's looks. He'd be as *scary* as ever.

"Alright, so pounced, like this," he said, jumping in exaggerated slow motion, stepping in front of Lavender, who gave way to him; another disgusting sigh escaped her. "And then I said, *'You will not threaten this village anymore, you foul creature!'*"

Harry didn't blink at the declaration, and took a mock swipe at him, growling. If he could, he'd be rolling around on the floor laughing. Pretending to be a vicious creature, especially one as exaggerated as one depicted in Lockhart's books, was fun.

"And then I drew my knife, and using a magical spell I've since forgotten, I boosted my physical strength, and shoved the creature to the ground...*good*, Harry. Harry himself had pretended to fall victim to the 'forgotten' spell, and fell softly onto the ground. Lockhart jumped on top of him. His teeth were blinding from this distance. *I wonder if I should tell him I don't swing that way.*

Constantly humoring himself was the *only* way to stay sane during these 'demonstrations.' Lockhart was speaking again.

"...and then I raised my silver knife, but as I saw the fear in his eyes...look fearful, Harry...*good*, I took mercy on him, and drawing my wand, I performed the immensely complex Homomorphous Charm-"

"Professor?" Harry asked from his position on the floor.

"Yes, Harry?"

"That charm doesn't cure Lycanthropy. It's a standard Transfiguration Reversal Spell that is taught to the Accidental Magical Reversal Squad and to Healer trainees. Seeing as it's impossible to transfigure a person into a werewolf, you're either lying or mistaken." He said this

all with a straight face and with as much dignity as one could lying on his back with the Golden Idiot leaning over him.

“Are you sure about that, Harry? After all, I believe that in my far more extensive travels of the world-“

“I researched it a week ago, sir. And sent a letter to my guardian. Both sources gave me the same information. Daphne added that had you done that, the werewolf would have certainly thrown you off him and either ripped your throat out or Turned you. Either way, you wouldn’t be standing here...she said some other things too, though they aren’t as relevant...could I have the use of my body back, sir? After all, the stone floor is well...stone, and rather hard. And if you don’t mind me saying, sir...it’s rather uncomfortable as a twelve-year old having a larger man leaning over them like that.”

The look on Lockhart’s face when he’d completed that speech was priceless. It was a combination of rage, horror, and complete surprise. It was as if all three emotions were fighting for supremacy, and none of them could win. It made for a rather comical sight. To add support to his request, his left hand began slowly sliding up his right robe sleeve, inching closer to his wand holster.

“Very well, Mr. Potter,” he forced out, jumping off of him. He extended a hand, and roughly yanked the twelve-year old to his feet. Harry glared at him, rubbing at his shoulder.

The bell rang.

Harry awoke with a start. A dull aching pain seemed to be throbbing behind his temples. He opened his eyes, and was surprised to see that his glasses were still on, but they were a bit grimy, somehow. He wiped them on his robes. Then he noticed that his robes were rather damp, and his socks soaked in water.

He looked around, trying to figure out where he was. Checking his watch, he was shocked to find out that it was 4 o’clock in the morning. Where was he?

Unsteadily getting to his feet, he staggered around a bit, using the wall for support until his knees would stop shaking. He glanced around, eyes peering into the dark. “*Lumos*,” he whispered. His wand tip lit, and he cautiously peered around the corner, praying he wouldn’t see Filch or the feline from hell, Mrs. Norris. He saw a few paintings he recognized: a pair of men sitting in armchairs around a fire, and a rather plump elderly witch holding aloft a wand, lighting sparking around her.

He was on the 2nd floor, in the Defense Against the Dark Arts corridor, specifically. Harry thought absently he’d probably be *running* from here in a nightmare.

He began moving, praying that the staircases weren’t moving, and that Filch was elsewhere. He had *no* idea how he’d ended up here, or why his robes were covered in filth and damp, but either way, he’d have hell to pay if he was caught.

He cast Silencing Charms on his feet (again thanking Daphne for teaching them to him, he couldn’t understand why they weren’t taught until 5th year), and set off at a brisk pace. Fortune was on his side, for once, and he managed to make it into the Entrance Hall without a problem. He dashed down the stairs, and ducked around a pillar.

A good thing, because Severus Snape was patrolling the dungeons. Had Harry waited a second later, he would have been in full view of the vindictive Potions Master. The man, luckily, wasn’t staying long, and strode up the staircase, past the pillar that Harry was hiding behind.

Harry waited until he was long gone before running over to the entrance to the Slytherin dorms, whispering the password, and sneaking in. The Common Room was empty.

Befuddled and confused, Harry snuck into the 2nd year boys’ dorm, and pulled off his robes. He noticed something in the pocket, and found Riddle’s diary. Frowning, he placed the diary inside his trunk, and closed the curtains. He collapsed on the bed and fell into a deep sleep. When he awoke the next day, he remembered nothing of his mysterious appearance outside Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom.

The next day, Harry awoke with a rather pounding headache. It faded by breakfast, though.

What Harry couldn't explain was why he was sleeping in his shirt, complete with his tie, and his pants. Or why his new robes (the replacements Daphne had purchased at Madam Malkins) were wet and soggy. Confused, he opened Riddle's diary, and took out a quill.

Good morning Tom.

Good morning, Harry. How did you sleep?

Funny you ask that. I've got a strange feeling that I was sleepwalking. My robes all damp and dirty, and I went to bed in my clothes, which are a bit filthy as well. I don't know where I could have gone, though.

Interesting. Well, Harry, I'm afraid I cannot help you there. I wonder how you managed to get dirty and wet without leaving the Common Room.

Who says I didn't?

Harry, I doubt you know Hogwarts well enough to navigate the castle while asleep. If you did sleep walk, you didn't go far. Nor did you go into the lower dungeons. Else, you'd still be there.

You're probably right. I just wish I knew what happened.

Don't let it bother you, Harry. It was probably a one-time occurrence.

I suppose.

Now then, you haven't written in me for while. How are classes going?

Pretty well. I had to play the werewolf in the Golden Idiot's re-enactment of his killing of the Wagga-Wagga werewolf...

Tom revealed no further information. Or rather, he could provide none. Harry had checked out a few books on dreams and sleepwalking for wizards, and intended to skim through them, to try to find out what happened. He would have gotten hell if he had been caught.

In addition, he saw no reason to worry Ginny and Hermione with the details of a dream that were slowly fading, and a strange, inexplicable occurrence that had soaked his robes.

That day, the trio decided to pay a long overdue visit to Hagrid. Ginny hadn't really gotten to know him, and all three had a free period (Ginny's was scheduled; Professor Flitwick had taken ill).

They walked over the bridge leading down the lower ground, and headed down the steps to his hut. Harry intently peered around to see if he saw any roosters. There were none. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

It was just a dream...

Hermione knocked on the door. "Hagrid? It's Harry, Ginny, and me."

The half-giant opened the door, and his face lit into a smile through his scraggly beard. Fang made a beeline for Harry, almost knocking him over in his excitement.

"Whoa, there Fang! Get off 'im!" he said, pulling the boarhound back by his collar. Their path cleared, the three students entered the house.

"So how are things going for yeh? How's First Year Ginny?" he asked jovially.

"Okay..." Ginny said. "Well, I love having Hermione and...Harry, as friends...but I wish Ron would talk to me," she said sadly. "He and I used to be so close."

"E's still actin' up?" he asked Harry. He nodded. "Yeh mention it to yer mum?" he asked Ginny. "I'd reckon that'd straighten 'im out."

"Yeah, Mum really let him have it over the summer...how do you know her? Or do you just know her reputation?" she asked curiously.

“Oh, I know yer mum from the First War. Dark times those were, dark times. Until ‘Arry, o’course.”

Harry looked down at the floor, and Ginny blushed. “Oh blimey, I’m sorry, ‘Arry. I know yeh don’t like ter hear about that.”

“It’s okay...so how have things been going?” he asked, trying to change the direction of the conversation.

“Strange yeh ask that. I’ve been dealing with a real mystery ‘ere. Yeh know I’ve got roosters, right?”

Harry nodded weakly, feeling his blood run cold.

“Well, sommat’s been killing ‘em. Real gruesome too. Like someone using ‘em for target practice. All cut up and bloody. Can’t think of any animal...Harry? Yeh okay?”

“No,” he said hurriedly, jumping out of his chair and racing out of the hut. He ran over to the pig troughs, and vomited several times, his mind racing. Hermione came tearing out of the hut, her face pale with worry. Ginny and Hagrid poked their heads out.

“Harry? Are you okay?” she asked.

*No, Hermione. Because I had a dream about killing all of the roosters, and now I find out it **actually happened!** No, I’m just fine, realizing that I’ve been out of my bed twice without knowing it, once casting a bunch of spells I don’t even know how to do. Just spiffing, Herm.*

But he said none of those things. “I need to see Madam Pomfrey. I think I’m coming down with something.”

Chapter 7: Discoveries in the Dark

Tom had not been very lucky in his life.

Perhaps the luckiest thing that had happened to him was that he was fated to be a wizard. Of course, as he pieced together the story of his parents, he began to realize that his Muggle father may have left his mother because she was a witch.

Though it was highly likely that he existed only because she was a witch, and had somehow ensnared his father.

In the pockets of his mother's clothing when she died in childbirth had been a picture of herself as a teenager. Her last words, as reported by the orphanage's nurse, by far the kindest person at the orphanage, had been that "I hope he looks like his father. Call him Tom Riddle for his father, middle name Marvolo for his grandfather."

She'd expired soon after she'd brought Tom into the world.

The image in question was not flattering to say the least. Even her son could safely say that Merope Riddle had not been a woman who would catch anyone's eye. The image in question had also been burned by her son at the age of six in a fit of anger.

But that was behind Tom. He took solace in the fact that his future self had been so powerful that the wizarding world feared to speak his name. At least, that's how Harry reported it.

The same Harry Potter that had destroyed him.

He understood now what had happened, and would have killed his future self, if such a thing were possible for a powerful intelligence linked to a diary, for his lack of foresight.

But no, all of this was in the past and the future, which didn't mean anything. The important things happened in the present.

Such as the day when Harry's unconscious mental defenses had finally been neutralized.

And what a fortunate day for that to happen for the diary-based intelligence of Tom Marvolo Riddle.

For today had been the day where a lapse in concentration had nearly cost him everything. He had not sufficiently blocked the boy's consciousness during a possession, and that had allowed him to witness a damagingly large amount of it. And the intelligent boy had immediately begun to put things together.

If there was one thing to be said about Harry Potter, the boy put clues together remarkably fast.

Especially considering that while Tom had been unable to root around Harry's mind at will, he was more than capable of implanting countless suggestions, compulsions, and foreign feelings and emotions.

In other words, he was suppressing the boy's curious nature and sense of self-preservation...and the boy was still fighting him tooth and nail, not even knowing of it.

He'd managed to erase the boy's memory of waking up in the DADA corridor after the first time he'd broken free of Tom's control. Thank Merlin it had not been in the Chamber itself. While Harry would have survived (a Parselmouth was immune to the effects of the Basilisk's glare), his plan would have been ruined. Even had he possessed the boy every waking second of the day (something that would have been extremely difficult), someone would have noticed, and reported it to either his guardian or to Dumbledore.

Either way, the game would have been up.

That incident had made Tom aware of the potential for failure. For if it happened once, it could happen again.

But today had been a breakthrough. Tom now had full access to the boy's memories. The possibilities were endless. He'd already planted suggestions and compulsions that would make Harry turn to him for aid before his guardian.

While it had been accomplished, it had also been remarkably difficult. The boy was almost fanatically loyal to the woman.

He was also loyal to his friends. Unfortunately, the two girls would certainly notice any dramatic behavioral shifts. For a mudblood, Granger was a fine witch. Ginny Weasley was young and naïve, but no idiot either.

At the moment, Tom was trying to suppress the memory of the 'nightmare.' Not erase it, as that would cause suspicion. Merely...make it seem of much less consequence, a minor detail.

If he could succeed, then he could begin to continue Salazar's work. The Basilisk was awakened, it only awaited its master's call.

And that damned mudblood Myrtle had come back as a ghost, determined to make everyone miserable for the rest of time. He'd had to use a Ghost Banishing Spell and a threat to neutralize her. She wouldn't report Harry's presence, she was far too afraid of him.

Yes, things were back on track.

Ah, the fraction of his awareness implanted deep in Harry's mind informed him his victim was awakening...

Harry lay awake that night in the Hospital Wing, staring at the ceiling.

He didn't understand. He couldn't have been the one to kill all of Hagrid's roosters. He'd been safe in his bed, dressed in his woolen pajamas that Daphne had transfigured from a similar muggle design. His wand had been safely nestled in his holster. And his last spell cast had been a Silencing Charm, something he *knew* he had cast before he had gone to bed.

As it had turned out, blaming his sudden loss of his stomach contents on an illness maybe hadn't been the best plan, as Madam Pomfrey had taken one look at him, shoved him onto a bed, and in seemingly one motion, pulled his shoes off and flung sheets over him. It was as effective as keeping him there as restraints would have been.

For one did not simply say 'No' to the Hogwarts Matron. There was no consequence, other than the fact that she might be even *broad*er in defining what symptoms warranted a continued stay.

Well, at least Hermione had promised to get his homework if he was out again.

Suddenly, there was a loud *CRACK*, and Dobby the House-Elf materialized on his bedspread. Harry started violently.

"What the bloody hell are *you* doing here?" Harry demanded.

"...Dobby warned Harry Potter sir, Dobby did what he could, but Harry Potter sir would not listen...Harry Potter sir did come back to Hogwarts, and grave things have happened, oh yes, terribly bad things..."

"What are you talking about? Why did you try to stop me?"

"Dobby cannot say," he said, straining against something. "Dobby's master found out he tried to warn Harry Potter sir. Dobby was lucky to escape alive, sir." Harry looked him over. He looked terrible, pale and thin and covered with mostly healed cuts and bruises. He must have been a dreadful sight when his injuries were

"Why didn't he kill you?" Harry asked curiously.

Dobby flinched. "...Dobby wishes Master had...But master needs Dobby, needs his House-Elves..."

"I'm sorry," he said truthfully. "But if you can't tell me anything, then I recommend you go, so that your master does not find you here."

"...Master had bound Dobby...Dobby cannot speak of what his wishes to speak of...Dobby cannot give up..."

Harry was about to ask what the House-Elf meant when he vanished with a loud *CRACK*.

Harry felt better the next day, but it was not until mid-afternoon that Madam Pomfrey released him, with instructions to take better care of himself. He ate heartily at the Ravenclaw table that night, something that Ginny and Hermione seemed relieved about.

For weeks, the most difficult thing to deal with was Flint's Quidditch practices. The first match was fast approaching, and as it was the only one that they had lost the previous year, Flint had essentially promised eternal suffering to any that could at all be blamed for losing it this year. But first, he would put the *entire* team through hell to see if they were tough enough to survive their punishment.

The result was long hours in the cold, wet Scotland evenings. Practices where Flint solved the problem of a lack of targets for his bludgers by using his own *players*. As the Seeker was the most important player on the field, and Flint had Malfoy in reserve if Harry was somehow unable to play (meaning that Harry was constantly checking whatever he ate or drank with a basic Toxin Detection Spell that he'd read about on a recommendation from Daphne; he'd heard of more underhanded methods of Slytherins getting what they wanted). As a result of his team 'depth,' Harry was viewed as expendable, and Flint thus gave Derrick and Bole the 'green light' to try to break Harry's arms and legs. Thus far, he'd ended up with a broken collarbone that was quickly repaired by Madam Pomfrey.

Classes with Lockhart were going as 'well' as ever. He continued to shy away from potential embarrassment by 'teaching' out of his books. Somehow, there had been no complaints from parents.

Harry continued to be frustrated with the lack of challenge from his classes. Of course, that was mostly because only Hermione spent more time studying than he did. But he found himself wishing constantly that they were actually learning something useful in Transfiguration and Charms.

In the former, Harry could now Transfigure objects into other objects of similar size and weight, transform rodents into water goblets (for all the good that did him), and change both stone and metal objects into a different type of stone or metal. In other words, he'd learned little or nothing that would benefit him in his long-term career, that of an

Auror. The class was currently on their second week of changing metals, and the last lesson had had them Transfiguring lead into bronze.

For geniuses such as Ronald Weasley and Lavender Brown, who would just as soon strangle themselves with neckties as pick up a book for a reason other than doing homework, this was, needless to say, quite challenging. Ditto for students with memories like leaky cauldrons, i.e. Neville Longbottom, who might forget his brain if it wasn't contained within his skull. For the majority of the Slytherin Second Years, basically, those not named Pansy Parkinson, Vincent Crabbe, and Gregory Goyle, it was rather simple, and they made a great show of acting bored and unchallenged in class. For which Malfoy had already received a detention from an unimpressed Professor McGonagall. Then again, the Malfoy heir had been dramatic in his imitation of a sleeping man, complete with loud snores and even when he was 'awake,' bellowing yawns.

On another note, his impromptu training sessions with Ginny and Hermione were going well. Harry had mastered the Blinding Hex and the Cutting Curse, adding them to his already impressive repertoire for a twelve-year old. Hermione had the latter down, but was having trouble with the former, and Harry had been spending a lot of time wandering around unable to see until Hermione used a quite *Finite Incantatem*.

Ginny, whom Harry had been unwilling to train when she'd first come upon one of their mock duels, was improving quickly as well. She didn't have the natural talent that Harry had, but with at least three wizards of well-above average power and skill in her family (Bill, Fred, and George), their little sister had inherited some of it as well. Her hexes, which could be a bit unrestrained at times, packed a wallop. Her Bat-Bogey Hex, while completely useless in a duel, was not pleasant either. But the reason it was useless in a duel was because it was far too easily blocked with a Shielding Spell.

Unlike the previous year, the Gryffindor-Slytherin game would take place after the Halloween Feast, on October 14th.

For the second year in a row, the coming of Halloween was unpleasant for the Boy-Who-Lived.

The nightmares had returned; perhaps not as strong as they had been, but bothersome none the less. Facing Voldemort the previous year had done nothing to reduce Harry's subconscious fear of the man, especially with his Cruciatus Curses...and what he had done to Hermione.

He dreamed of the chamber often as well. Daphne offered few explanations as to how this time of year was capable of bringing on the nightmares, except that perhaps his mind was more preoccupied at the time. She promised to look into it.

Tom was of a constant comfort. While he had not had the traumatic experiences Harry had had as an infant, his life had been unpleasant, from a few abusive staff members at the orphanage, to his strange manifestations of magical power, which at the time, he couldn't explain. He told Harry how terrifying it was one day to be so angry with his mother that the one picture he had of her had caught fire, and he'd been unable to quench the flames before the image was destroyed.

Harry's physical state had steadily declined. He didn't understand how, but he had dark shadows under his eyes, and his skin was pale and his eyes tired. He also felt physically exhausted a great deal of the time. Ginny and Hermione were convinced that he was suffering from nightmares. He was, but that wasn't the cause of his exhaustion, he'd been able to sleep at least six hours a night. While it wasn't a lot, it should have been enough to keep him going.

He'd been rather floored when Madam Pomfrey had looked him over, pulled him aside, and asked him if he was a *werewolf*. Obviously, Harry had told her he wasn't. When he asked why in Merlin's name she would ask that, she said that his symptoms matched one who had recently been Turned.

On Halloween 1992, Hermione woke up earlier than the rest of her roommates, as usual. Lavender and Parvati weren't extremely heavy sleepers, yet they often required a wake-up call. Today was one of

those days. After she showered and changed, she yelled into the room for her two roommates to awaken, only to get a pillow thrown at her by an irritated Lavender for her efforts.

Leaving the other two girls to get themselves up, she hurried out of the dormitory. She saw the familiar sight of Ron Weasley, Dean Thomas, Neville Longbottom, and Seamus Finnegan talking animatedly about something. Fred and George Weasley, who had been fairly civil to her from the day she arrived, were once more huddled in the corner, plotting one immature prank or another.

She sighed at the sight. Harry and her both believed that the twins were geniuses, yet their marks were average, often abysmal. Why couldn't they see how important it was to study hard and do well?

Of course, Harry said they could make quite a living as advisors for Zonko's, or perhaps start a competitor. Their pranks had advanced far beyond a bucket of water over someone's door. Already, they'd had to go to the Hospital Wing with severe nosebleeds, though no one knew what had caused them.

They were often in the Hospital Wing, and while they readily admitted that their injuries were the direct result of fooling around with magic and magical objects. Madam Pomfrey could never seem to get the truth out of them, however. She often wondered why Dumbledore didn't stop them; he *had* to know, and what they were doing was dangerous. But the Headmaster had a...strange sense of humor, and it probably amused him.

Hermione still thought it irresponsible.

She made her way down to the two boys. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw Neville look up and wave, while Ron scowled. Dean hit him on the arm. She waved back to Neville, rewarding the boy for trying to be friendly with her.

"So what are you two working on *now*?" she asked, hands on her hips. Fred and George, or as they liked to call themselves, Gred and Forge, looked up in surprise.

"Why if it isn't-" Fred began.

“-ickle Hermy?” George finished. Hermione glared at him. She *despised* the nickname, even if it was more affectionate than anything else.

The Weasley twins had always looked out for her, ever since they discovered her crying in the common room. She'd been terribly homesick, and she'd felt betrayed that Harry, whom she'd liked very much, had ended up as a Slytherin, the house that everyone said was for manipulative and Dark witches and wizards. She'd been Muggleborn, friendless, and naïve.

And so she'd believed them.

Fred and George had evidently been sneaking down to play some prank or another, and had been shocked to find her sitting in front of the fire in her pajamas, tears streaking down her face. They asked her what was wrong, and she'd told them. They'd done their best to cheer her up, and while she became more indignant than anything else at the suggestion of playing pranks, it had gotten her mind off of missing her parents. Then, George had suggested that she write her parents, and promised to show her how to use the school owls.

The next day, she'd seen her second glimpse of Harry Potter. This one was of a small, scared looking black-haired boy being held at wand point by the twins for attempting to scare her. She hadn't seen it that way, and in hindsight, he'd been reaching out to her. What she could be proud of is that she'd shouted at them to leave him alone.

But then she'd said the most horrid things, and every time that Harry had tried to approach her, she'd basically told him to shove off. And then, in the library, she'd hit a sore spot, and he'd ended up yelling at her. She'd had her fears 'confirmed,' and called him a bastard. She'd felt so terrible about how she had treated them, but Harry had refused to let her drown in her misery, instead focusing on how wonderful the friendship they had was.

She smiled at the memory of what he had told her the day that Dumbledore had handed Gryffindor the House Cup on a silver platter.

“Let him bask in his idiocy, Hermione. If he's going to be that way, he doesn't deserve to know the truth. Let him figure it out on his own.”

The students whose opinions are worth caring about will realize when they hear it how undeserved it was."

"You're right, Harry...you're always right that way..."

"Bollocks, Hermione. We've both made mistakes. But I don't need to put Weasley down to know that I'm better than him, and it's got nothing to do with wealth or status. I don't want his respect, because it isn't worth anything."

When Hermione got downstairs on Halloween morning, greeting Hagrid as he walked by carrying massive pumpkins, presumably for the Halloween Feast that night. Hermione had missed the last feast, but she'd heard about the amazing decorations created by the half-giant and enchanted by Flitwick.

Her mind drifted back to that horrible night...the night that she had first seen Harry for who he was...

The night he had saved her life...and nearly lost his own in the process...

It had all begun in Charms class, one class she didn't have with Harry...

*It had been the day they were learning the Levitation Charm. Naturally, she had read ahead on the subject, and had memorized the pronunciation of the two-word incantation, and the exact 'swish and flick' wand motion. She'd been paired with Ronald, whose 'friendship' with Hermione, she thought, looking back on it, had probably been more about homework help, then actual socializing. Ron wasn't **using** her, but he did pretend to be more interested than he actually was.*

After Flitwick had introduced the lesson and the charm they were to be using, they begun.

"It's Wingardium Levi-osa! Not Le-viosa!" she cried for the umpteenth time as Ron tried to Levitate the feather. "Honestly, Ron, you just need to change your pronunciation-"

"You do it then, if you're so clever!" he snapped. She nodded. "Wingardium Leviosa," she pronounced slowly and carefully. Her feather rose into the air, and she controlled the altitude with flicks of her wand. Ron was fuming.

*"Of course **you** can do it, you bloody know-it-all," he grumbled.*

"Language, Ronald," she snapped, ignoring the insult.

"Lan-guage, Ron-ald," he mimicked nastily. "Honestly, you're not my mum!"

"Obviously, she didn't teach you manners," she snapped back.

*"What's **that** supposed to mean?" he demanded.*

"It means that you have the social skills of a troll. Now, if we could just get back to the lesson-"

"Hell no! Seamus, switch with me, would you?" he called over to the sandy-haired boy. He shook his head. "You deal with her, mate," he whispered. Hermione heard it though, and felt tears burning in her eyes.

"Well, if that's how you feel, Ronald-" she began angrily, tears now streaking down her face.

The bell rang.

Ron took the opportunity to pack up his things in record time, and fled the classroom. Hermione stalked after him, angrily swiping at her tears.

"Wait up, Ronald! We're not finished!" she cried. He stopped, and turned around, bright red.

*"Why don't you leave me alone you bloody know-it-all? Go find some friends! Oh, wait, I forgot...**you don't have any!**"*

Dean and Seamus looked shocked, and Neville a bit angry. Hermione had had enough, and ran as fast as she could down the stairwell,

nearly taking out Harry, who was wandering around the Charms corridor.

She'd run all the way down the dungeons, then she'd gotten cold, and miserably wandered into a bathroom in the dungeons. She sat on the toilet, sobbing her eyes out. Parvati had even come by and asked if she wanted to talk, but she'd rebuffed her. Finally, her stomach had made its presence felt, and tired, hungry, and miserable, she decided she'd get a quick bit to eat.

Wiping furiously at her eyes, trying to erase the evidence of two hours of crying, she'd weakly pushed the door open...

And stepped into the middle of a nightmare.

Standing before her was a troll. A fully grown mountain troll.

A massive creature whose head scraped the ceiling of the dungeon. The smell was overpowering, and it was only because of her clogged nose that she'd failed to detect the stench before. It was wearing nothing but a loincloth, and in its massive right hand, a huge club the size of a tree trunk. It raised the club, and Hermione reflexively raised her hands, as if to fight off the blow. She saw her life flashing before her eyes, and her last thought was that she'd finally found a place she thought she'd been accepted, only to lose everything...

When a burst of purple light exploded from the back of the troll, causing the creature to jerk its head back and turn around slowly, trying to see what had struck it...

And through its tree-trunk legs, Hermione saw the shocked and horrified figure of Harry Potter, right arm extended, wand tip pointed at the troll.

The troll raised its club, and brought it down. Hermione watched in stark horror as Harry rolled away from the thunderous blow, which dented the stone floor. She'd almost let out a whoop of glee, when Harry paused, raising his wand again. He'd screamed something at her before running away from another blow, but she'd been frozen, her feet rooted to the floor, and her senses not functioning normally.

The troll had raised its club, and it had swung forward just as Harry had raised his wand to incant a curse. Hermione had tried to scream, but her mouth wasn't working...

Harry's body had slackened sickeningly against the impact of the club, bending into the blow. She heard a series of loud, sharp cracks, sounds that chilled her blood. In slow motion, she watched Harry's body fly across the dungeon hall, crashing into the stone wall with another series of horrific snaps, and a blood-curdling scream.

The troll had raised its club to finish off the eleven-year old, when five people that Hermione hadn't even seen behind her had cast Stunning Spells simultaneously...

The rest of the night was a blur to her. She vaguely remembered insisting that she accompany her savior to the Hospital Wing, and then being confronted by the boys about the fact that her sleeve was drenched with Harry's blood...

"Ermione?"

She started. She'd been standing still, staring out the window, wringing her hands absently. She looked up to see Hagrid, looking out from behind a pair of large pumpkins with a concerned frown. "Yeh okay?"

"I'm...I'm fine Hagrid," she said, wiping at the tears forming in her eyes. "Just remembering..."

"Ah, it's Halloween, ain't it? The day 'Arry got hurt by that troll?" She nodded. "Yeh shouldn't feel guilty 'bout that, 'Ermione. He doesn't blame yeh."

"How do you know that?" she asked.

Hagrid shrugged. "Always been able ter read people, 'specially kids...yeh sure yer okay?"

"I'll be fine," she said confidently. "Thanks Hagrid." She beamed up at him.

He chuckled. "I'm always there, 'Ermione. Now, why don'tcha get down ter breakfast. I'm sure 'Arry and Ginny are worried 'bout yeh."

Thanking the half-giant once more (Harry had asked him about it the previous year), Hermione hurried into the Great Hall, and saw her friends sitting together at the Slytherin table. Harry was having a rare conversation with Theodore Nott; most of the time, they'd exchange a few cryptic words and that was that. Nott was also rarely out of the company of Daphne Greengrass, a girl who struck her as quite cold and unsympathetic. Based on what Harry had told her about arranged pureblood marriages, a custom Hermione considered barbaric, she was quite certain they might have been betrothed, and were aware of the fact. Thus, they tried to get used to being with one another.

She cautiously approached the Slytherin table, and a number of glares and hissed comments came at her, which she ignored. Malfoy hissed something insulting, and Harry's head spun around, his wrist cocked and ready to discharge his wand into his hand. The pureblooded boy paled and stopped talking.

The look in Harry's eyes was one that she saw often, not that it affected her any less. It was a dark look, a look full of anguish and despair which had morphed into blinding hatred. Harry had had a hard life, and so had Daphne. In taking refuge within each other, they'd also learned to hate those who had made the one they loved so miserable. The malice that she had seen in Daphne's eyes directed at Lucius Malfoy had been shocking.

It amazed her that a woman who could be calm and collected, and other times fun-loving and easily amused, could hate so much. Harry was the same way.

As she sat down next to Ginny, she greeted the redhead, who was in the middle of a rather interesting conversation with her best friend.

"...so, Ginny, you know how I've been reading up on pureblood marriages. I was just curious as to whether you were ever the

recipient of any offers. Especially because female Weasleys are so rare.”

Ginny looked thoughtful. “I suppose its possible,” she admitted. “Obviously, my parents turned them down; they wouldn’t hide something like that from me, and the chances of Mum taking away my freedom like that are slim to none. Also, while the Weasleys are purebloods, they haven’t had the kind of inheritances other families have had in ages. Mum’s family, the Prewetts, didn’t have that much either. My parents have never mentioned an offer, for obvious reasons...it’s so awkward to think of being married at such a young age...”

She trailed off, turning bright red. Harry rolled his eyes. “Ginny...?”

“I know! I know!” she fumed. “It’s just hard! I’ve adored you for so many years, and even though you aren’t like that fairytale prince of my dreams, it’s hard to break old habits!”

Hermione placed a hand on her shoulder, and looked Harry in the eyes. Something strange flashed in them for a second, but it was gone as soon as it came. “Maybe you are being a *little* harsh on her, Harry?” But Ginny was the one who answered.

“No, he’s right. And its helped...sort of...”

For the first time, Hermione looked over Harry. It was Halloween, so the dark shadows under his eyes was to be expected. He would rarely admit it until after the fact, but he had nightmares every year in the weeks leading up to Halloween. But other things were strange too. He seemed very weary, and his skin was paler than usual. He also seemed to be tiring easier, as if he wasn’t getting enough sleep. Hermione was surprised by this, because despite the nightmares, Harry swore that he was still getting enough sleep to get by, and refused Dreamless Sleep Potions. This was the first time she’d really noticed symptoms, so she let him get away with it.

He blinked at her, and she realized she’d been staring. “Something wrong, Hermione?” The way he said this seemed somewhat accusing.

“Nothing. You just look a little tired, that’s all.”

Harry nodded, but refused to comment further.

When Hermione and Ginny followed the rest of the school into the Great Hall for the Halloween Feast, Harry was not with them.

Hermione's best friend had begged off, saying that he was exhausted, and desperately needed some sleep. He said he'd feel more comfortable sleeping in his own bed. Hermione had protested this, telling Harry that if he'd been feeling unwell, he should go to the Infirmary, but Harry refused, saying that he doubted Madam Pomfrey would let him out the next day.

Hermione finally agreed, as it appeared that he was ready to collapse. Ginny was also uncertain, but let him do it his way. The last time they'd seen him, he'd been tiredly walking down the staircase that led to the dungeons. Ginny promised to save him some food.

The Halloween Feast, which neither girl had participated in (without Harry's powerful presence, they sat at the Ravenclaw table), was superb. Flitwick had outdone himself with the decorations. The massive pumpkins that Hagrid had been carrying that morning, along with a large number of others, had been turned into huge charmed jack-o'-lanterns that made loud noises matching the images that they depicted. The food was excellent, and even Hermione had to admit that the dancing skeletons that Dumbledore had brought it as entertainment were amusing to watch.

That said, nothing could draw Hermione away from her eternal crusade for learning, and halfway into the performance, the bushy-haired girl told Ginny of her desire to go to the Library before curfew to check out a book on the rights of magical creatures. Ginny grabbed some of the food and packed it into a napkin, and they slipped out of the hall.

They hurried up to the Third Floor corridor, from which was a staircase that led directly to the Fourth Floor corridor where the library was located. Chatting idly, they rounded the corner that led into the DADA wing of the Third Floor, then Ginny stopped, her jaw dropping and her eyes widening. Hermione looked up.

The first thing she saw was that Myrtle had apparently flooded the bathroom again. The stone floor was covered with an inch or two of water. But directly above that, hanging by her tail from the torch bracket, was Mrs. Norris, Filch's familiar, and the bane of the Weasley twins' existence. The cat was stiff as a rock, and unmoving. But above that, written what appeared to be blood...

The Chamber of Secrets Has Been Opened...

Enemies of the Heir, Beware...

Ginny screamed.

Suddenly the hall was full of bustling and loudly talking students, the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws heading up to their dormitories. The Feast must have ended before the girls had thought it would. A few Slytherins and Hufflepuffs, older students hoping to make a last quick stop to the library, were with them. The front row stopped as they took in the sight before them, including the two girls apparently standing there, admiring their handiwork.

"*MRS. NORRIS!*" a man cried, and Argus Filch pushed his way past the stunned students and ran forward, his feet splashing the ice-cold water. He let out a sob at the sight of his apparently dead cat, then rounded on the two girls.

"You! You've...you've *murdered her!* *I'LL KILL YOU!*" he bellowed, his eyes flashing furiously.

"You will do *nothing* of the sort, Argus!" Professor McGonagall cried. "You cannot honestly believe that *these* two killed her? A First Year and a Second Year?"

"That one's a Slytherin!" he spat. "They're always after me!" Ginny whimpered and took a step back in fear.

"Enough!" Albus Dumbledore cried, as he pushed through the crowd, followed by Professor Snape. "It is obvious that these two were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Students! All of you, return to your dormitories!"

His order seemed to have some kind of magic behind it, and Hermione felt herself beginning to follow her fellow Gryffindors...

"Not you, Miss Granger," McGonagall said. "Or you, Miss Weasley. Please come with us." Meanwhile, Dumbledore had detached the cat from the torch bracket, and was handing the stiff body to a distraught Filch. Professor Snape was gazing fearfully at the writing on the wall.

"Why don't we use my office, Albus. It's closest," Professor Lockhart said brightly, eager to help. He clearly didn't understand the gravity of the situation.

"Very well, Gilderoy. Minerva, if you would." The witch nodded, and pushed open the door.

They laid Mrs. Norris down on Lockhart's desk, and Professor Dumbledore began to poke and prod at her, muttering various spells. McGonagall was nervously wringing her hands, while Snape looked haunted. Filch was still sobbing. Hermione and Ginny were standing in the doorway nervously. Lockhart was going on to no one in particular about the possibilities of what Mrs. Norris had been killed by.

"She's not dead, Argus," Dumbledore finally announced. "She had been Petrified...but how, I cannot say..."

"*Petrified?*" McGonagall gasped.

"...What does that mean?" Filch demanded. "Will my sweet Mrs. Norris be okay?" Snape wrinkled his nose in distaste.

"Pomona has begun to grow some mandrakes this year, a project for the second years, and Severus's N.E.W.T. Potions class. Once the Mandrake Restorative Draughts are completed, she will be revived and well again. I believe that concludes our business."

"But my cat has been *petrified!*" Filch cried, glaring at Ginny and Hermione. "I want to see some *punishment!*"

"Argus," McGonagall cut him off sharply. "Neither one of these students could have petrified her. The only way I know of is a

complex Dark Ritual, one they certainly would not have had time to perform in the five minutes after they left the Feast.”

“Minerva is right,” Dumbledore said. Turning to the girls, he said, “If you would please return to your dormitories...by the way, where is Mr. Potter?”

“He felt tired,” Ginny explained. “He said he needed sleep.”

“Very well,” Dumbledore replied, looking thoughtful. “I suppose you two had best go. Minerva, if you would escort Miss Granger, then rejoin me. Severus-“

“I’ll be fine on my own, Professor,” Ginny said quickly. “I know a shortcut back.” Snape looked pleased that he wouldn’t have to babysit the redhead.

“As you wish. Goodnight, Ginny and Hermione.”

The two girls left the room, followed by Professor McGonagall. She stopped them after they got outside. “It would be best if you didn’t speak of this, but word will get out anyhow. You are of course free to tell Mr. Potter tomorrow.” Ginny nodded, and Hermione and McGonagall left.

She dashed down the corridor to the hidden entrance that Harry had shown her during her second week. Tapping her wand on the correct brick, she slid inside...

And nearly tripped over something lying on the ground. She staggered, pushing against the wall for support, then heard a groan. “*Lumos.*”

What Ginny hadn’t been expecting to find was the passed out form of her best friend who to her knowledge was sleeping in the Slytherin dormitories. Harry was lying unconscious, slumped against the wall next to the stairs. Ginny thought for a moment that he had been attacked, but the groan that escaped him and the fact that he was breathing calmed her fears. She shook him awake.

“Harry? What are you doing here?” she asked.

Harry groaned. “What?”

“I asked you what you were doing here!” she cried.

“*Where* is *here*?” he asked, looking around. He frowned. “Why the bloody hell *am* I here?”

“I don’t know, that’s what I’m trying to figure out,” Ginny said. “Lets get out of here, something big has happened, and I’ve got to tell you about it. You look a mess.”

“Thanks, Ginny,” he said sarcastically, then yawned. “Though I do feel a mess.”

Ginny helped him to his feet, and managed to get the exhausted boy into the Slytherin Common Room without a problem. Apparently, the students had already been sent to bed. Harry tiredly stumbled up the stairs to the boys’ dormitories, leaving Ginny standing alone in the Common Room, her mind racing.

Chapter 8: Dangers of Dueling

As Harry James Potter slept, Tom Marvolo Riddle plotted.

What he had feared had once again nearly come to pass.

Twice, Potter's subconscious had nearly overwhelmed him, forcing him to knock the boy unconscious to regain control. Once, it had happened just as they were leaving the chamber. It had happened again as he led Harry back down to the Slytherin Dormitories, only this time, he hadn't had time to awaken the boy, and get him into the Common Room, erasing any possible suspicion. Instead, he had been found by Weasley, who despite her innocent appearance, was a Slytherin, and seemed very suspicious of Harry.

He didn't fear that she might turn on them, she was a Light witch, after all, and loyal to her childhood idol. And to her adolescent friend, by consequence.

He had to more cautious. Potter had chosen his friends well. Tom had never had any friends; even Evan Rosier was merely an extremely loyal servant and confidant. And a powerful wizard, nearly as ruthless at age 15 as his mentor was. He'd cast the Cruciatus on a 2nd year named Julia McCain simply because he been bored, and she'd annoyed him...and wiped her memory, of course. Though Dumbledore distrusted Evan as much as he distrusted Tom.

Still, the night had hardly been a failure. He'd unleashed the Serpent of Slytherin, though he was disappointed that he'd been unable to kill the squib's cat. Still, the fact that it was Petrified, rather than outright dead, added to the mystery, and consequently the fear.

And that was what unleashing the Basilisk was about. It was about fear, terror, and uncertainty. He wanted the students to fear each other, to suspect their closest friends. He preferred that his target be Mudbloods, but it might be effective to mix in a pureblood, simply to add to the chaos. For fear created division, and when Tom returned to reclaim his power, in a rejuvenated 16-year old form, he wanted Hogwarts to tremble beneath him.

And that the boy they viewed as their savior would be the harbinger of his wrath...?

All the sweeter.

When Harry awoke early the next morning, feeling more refreshed than he had in weeks, he was surprised to see Ginny sitting in one of the armchairs, watching him descend the staircase. He slowed up, but kept coming, and she beckoned for him to sit in the chair next to her.

"Harry," she began nervously, swallowing hard. "I want to talk to you about what happened last night." Harry had to admit he was surprised that this girl who was so star-struck when they first met could confront him like this.

"Alright, but I was telling you the truth. I don't remember what happened. Tom thinks I might have been sleepwalking before, maybe I was."

Ginny, who had always been a bit disapproving of the diary intelligence that Harry talked with on a regular basis, nodded. "I suppose that's possible. But what were you doing *there*?"

"I don't understand. What happened last night, Ginny?"

Ginny muttered a curse, and a tinge of pink appeared on her cheeks. She was obviously fighting down a full-fledged blush. "Sorry, Harry, I forgot you didn't know. Hermione wanted to go the library after the feast, and when we were walking through the Third Floor Corridor, we came upon something...odd."

"What?"

"Well, hanging from the torch bracket was Filch's cat; Mrs. Norris was hanging from it. We later found out she was petrified--"

Harry gaped. "*Petrified?* As in turned to *stone*?"

Ginny frowned. "Yes. How did you know?"

"Know what? What Petrification was? I came across a reference to it earlier this year. I didn't find out how to do it, though, the book is probably Restricted. I'm not sure, but it's probably a type of Dark ritual."

Ginny frowned further. "Exactly...but that wasn't all..."

"Go on," he encouraged her.

"Well, written above Mrs. Norris, in blood, was a message: The Chamber of Secrets has been opened...enemies of the Heir, beware..."

"The Heir of Slytherin?" Harry asked.

Ginny's frown deepened. "What do you know about it?"

"I know what the Chamber of Secrets is; found it in an old book in the Dressler Family Library. It's a myth, though..."

"Apparently not," Ginny pointed out.

"Maybe," Harry admitted. "Have you heard the story?"

"Of course not! Do you honestly believe that Mum would expose poor, innocent, helpless little Ginevra Molly Weasley to anything like that?" she exclaimed.

"Probably not. Your mum has struck me as extremely protective."

"Brilliant observation...but back to what we were talking about, you are *sure* you had nothing to do with what happened?" Ginny asked worriedly.

Harry glared at her. "*You* think I did?" he demanded. Ginny shrank back from the glare, and his expression softened. "I'm sorry, Ginny. I'm just...I don't know, your brother made the whole bloody school think I was a Dark Wizard, and it's just a sore spot..."

“Harry, you’re rambling,” she pointed out with a grin. Then her expression became apologetic. “I’m sorry, Harry. I should have realized that you’d be sensitive to that...but do you know anything else about the Chamber of Secrets?” she asked hopefully.

Harry shook his head. “No, just that Salazar Slytherin was involved...I’ll owl Daphne, see what she knows.”

“Good idea, she’ll probably know.”

If Hogwarts was a rumor mill, then Ronald Billius Weasley was the water source that powered it.

And far too often, Harry was the flour in the grindstone.

For once, that wasn’t true.

It wasn’t Ron’s fault entirely, of course. Even before the youngest Weasley son had come to Hogwarts, there was not a day that went by without a secret becoming public knowledge, a person being shamed, or a person being ostracized.

Such was the wizarding world and society in general. A cold, opportunistic world, with a public that would turn on a hero faster than one could blink.

And an event such as the Caretaker’s cat being subjected to a Dark Curse far beyond the power of a student, a message that threatened violence against muggleborns, half-bloods, and blood traitors written in *blood*, and two girls known to be extremely close to the Boy-Who-Lived being found at the scene of the crime, well, it caused a bit of a stir.

However, even Ron couldn’t pin it on them. Nor could he pin it on Harry, as Ginny was the only one who knew that Harry hadn’t been in the dormitory at the time. Of course, she didn’t suspect him, but it was good that she was the only one that knew. So in all, it was universally accepted that the two girls had been at the wrong place, at the wrong time.

And of course, their alibi, that of Hermione wishing to go to the library, wasn't the most implausible thing in the world.

No, the prime suspect was not Harry Potter, or Hermione Granger, or Ginevra Weasley.

It was Draco Malfoy, who had also been absent at the time of the feast, along with his cronies, Vincent Crabbe Jr. and Gregory Goyle Jr. And the pureblooded heir wasn't exactly trying to vehemently deny the rumors either. He was encouraging them by being intentionally and obviously devious and openly deceptive. Which told Harry instantly that he was lying; he would not openly flaunt that he was a dangerous Dark Wizard if he had something legitimate to hide.

Nonetheless, Harry still found it astounding that he would take the risk of someone taking it seriously, and reporting it to an influential parent or family friend. Lucius would probably discipline the boy for his arrogance and carefree attitude.

Rumors began to abound that Gilderoy Lockhart intended to do something about the Heir of Slytherin, something to improve the students' ability to defend themselves. Harry supposed he could show them proper techniques of fleeing like a frightened child. If Lockhart could perform any kind of spell that would allow him to combat a wizard powerful enough to perform an extremely sped-up version of a Petrification Ritual, he'd eat Hedwig.

Speaking of his familiar, she was currently pecking at his bacon as he composed his latest letter to Daphne. Signing it, he looked it over.

Daphne,

I'm just responding to your last letter, but I also have a few questions I'd like to ask you. Things had been going very well here, with my training progressing well, and even Ginny beginning to come into her own. She's going to hit a wall soon though. She'd had trouble with the Shielding Spell, as is to be expected. On that note, I want to try to learn new methods of defensive magic. Are there any other Shielding or Protection Spell you think I might be capable of? I feel I've mastered the basics.

On another note, a very strange, very disturbing thing has happened. It doesn't involve me; at least I don't believe it does. Yesterday, Filch's familiar, Mrs. Norris, was found Petrified, hanging from a torch bracket in the Fourth Floor Corridor, by Ginny and Hermione. Written on the wall above that was a message written in what appeared to be blood. 'The Chamber of Secrets had been Opened...Enemies of the Heir, beware...'

That brings me to my second question. I've read references to the Chamber before, but always believed it to be a myth. Apparently, that is not the case. I was wonder if you might be able to shed some light on the subject.

Just wanted to let you know that I'm doing fine, and so are Hermione and Ginny. Ginny especially is learning a lot, and I'm curious as to whether they might consider advancing her at some point. Because with our help, and her own intelligence (her brother Bill wasn't Head Boy for nothing; Percy's on that track; and Fred and George are geniuses), she's cruising through first year. I'm sure her parents are ecstatic. Oh, and Hermione and I are doing extremely well, as always. I'm really looking forward to 6th year, and N.E.W.T. classes. They should present a real challenge. Not that Transfiguration or Potions isn't occasionally difficult, but DADA is a joke, and Charms is ridiculously simple. Honestly, if you can't perform a Tap-Dancing Charm by second year, you need to work on your own instead of dragging down the class.

I hope to see you at Christmas.

Love,

Harry

Harry folded up the letter, and tied a ribbon around it. Then he extended it to Hedwig, who took one last bite of bacon before clamping the letter in her beak. Harry absently scratched her behind the ears, and she crooned, before taking off and flying out the window, bound for Claw's Clan.

"Was that to Daphne?" Hermione asked, taking a seat next to him. Harry nodded.

"What were you writing to her about?" Ginny asked in a low voice.

"The Chamber of Secrets, and some advice on defensive magic," Harry whispered.

Hermione's eyes lit up in excitement. "Do you think she knows anything about the Chamber?"

Harry shrugged. "It's possible. If she doesn't, she'll have the resources to find out about it. I include everything I knew."

"Including the fact that I found you passed out on the stairs, *very* close to the scene?" Ginny asked in an irritated whisper.

Hermione gaped. "*What?*"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know, honestly...I don't remember anything except Ginny waking me up." He looked up at her. "I can promise you I didn't have anything to do with what happened, though. And that I managed to get some good sleep last night, and feel better than I have in weeks."

"Still...that's rather strange Harry...has this happened before?" she asked cautiously, as if afraid she'd either find out something she didn't want to know or set Harry off. She was getting dangerously close to the latter. "Does this have anything to do with what happened at Hagrid's?" she asked hopefully.

Anger seared through Harry's veins at the insinuation that he was involved with the whole thing. *From his best friend no less!*

"*No, Hermione,*" Harry forced out between his clenched teeth. "I had *nothing* to do with it!" he practically screamed at her. A few people up and down the table turned to look at him, and then went back to their conversations at Harry's glare.

Hermione looked devastated. "I'm sorry Harry," she said, tears in her eyes. "That was...incredibly rude and thoughtless." She ducked her head in shame. Ginny watched him with critical eyes, but said nothing.

Harry reached out and squeezed Hermione's shoulder. "Hermione, it's okay. Just...I'm sorry too." She looked up at him.

"...I just wish my inquisitive nature wouldn't get the better of me..." she rambled. Harry scooted over and pulled her into an embrace. She seemed shocked, then relaxed.

"Hermione?" he mumbled into her shoulder.

"Yes?"

"Shut up."

Ginny laughed.

As the days passed, the chatter surrounding the Chamber of Secrets died down a little. At least until Hermione got impatient, and in her History of Magic Class, asked Professor Binns to explain the legend. The ghost was unwilling, but once he saw the reaction the class had to the subject being brought up (namely, paying attention), he explained the legend to them. Harry got the basics of it from Hermione, but continued to watch the skies for Hedwig. When she flew down out of the owl window and dropped Daphne's reply in his lap, he eagerly grabbed it and ripped it open.

Dearest Harry,

Thank you for informing me about the events at Hogwarts on Halloween. It is probably being hushed up by the school, or the Ministry, as no record of it has appeared in the Daily Prophet, nor any newspapers available in Claw's Clan. The Petrification is indeed of great concern. Outside of a few rituals, I know of only one spell that can achieve those effects, and only wizards with Lord-level power have dared to attempt it.

I hope that Ginny and Hermione haven't been given a hard time for being the first on the scene. It's obvious they were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Don't think I didn't notice that you weren't with them, Harry. It was Halloween, and if you are suffering from nightmares, I want to know. In fact, I don't want you to be kept awake at night because you are too stubborn to get a Dreamless Sleep Potion from Poppy. You need sleep, Harry, both to function normally and to facilitate the growth of your magic.

If you need to talk, I'm sure I can press Dumbledore to allow us some time together. On that note, I've seriously begun considering moving full-time into Dressler Manor. I need to be closer to you and to the wizarding world in general. The only concern I have is that we may not see your friends often. If you'd rather stay, we will, though I will probably only be there in the summer.

As for the Chamber of Secrets, it is indeed something I considered a legend until recently.

As the legend puts it: As you know, Salazar Slytherin, one of the founders of Hogwarts, made it his life's pursuit to cleanse the wizarding world of the taint of muggle blood. Contrary to popular belief, while a Dark Wizard, he did not believe in senseless slaughter of non-purebloods and squibs. In fact, his own son, Julius Slytherin, was a squib. Salazar died at the hands of Godric Gryffindor before he could know this.

Rather, Salazar believed that to weed out impure wizards, one simply had to deny training to those not of wizarding blood. He wished to keep Muggleborns, half-bloods, and anyone of traceable muggle descent out of Hogwarts. Godric and Rowena, who were not yet wed, fiercely opposed this, while Helga sought to find a compromise, such as perhaps limiting Slytherin House to purebloods. Salazar was unwilling to settle, and left the school. He journeyed the world, but his disdain of those of impure blood turned into raw hatred, and his power was tainted by Darkness. Eventually, he gathered his forces and waged war on the other Founders. At the Battle of Peregrine's Nest, Godric killed Salazar with a thrust of his sword.

So ends the traceable history of Salazar Slytherin. Or at least what is relevant to this topic; his son did bear magical children. And here, the myth begins. As the myth goes, Salazar's descent into Darkness

began before his travels into the hinterlands of Mongolia and the Dark Forests of Albania. It states that before he left the school, Salazar and his most loyal followers secretly constructed a massive underground chamber beneath the foundations of Hogwarts, which stood as a monument to his greatness, and contained the weapon of his vengeance, the Monster of Slytherin.

For centuries, nothing further was heard of the Chamber, until about fifty years ago, when a number of students were attacked. Threatening messages similar to the one that you transcribed were written on the walls, and six students were attacked. Five were Petrified, one was killed. After that, the culprit was supposedly apprehended and expelled, and the attacks ceased. I do not know who the culprit was, as the name never became public knowledge. It was covered up by the school, at that time directed by Armando Dippet.

On the subject of magical defense. I am pleased to hear that you've mastered the standard Shielding Charm. As you probably know, it is a one-use charm designed to block up to six moderate-power spells that hit it within the time period of three seconds. It deflects all or most of the spells energy back at the castor when aimed properly, but more commonly will simply deflect it in another direction. I'm sure you also know that it is seriously limited. It cannot block physical objects, nor can it block more powerful types of curses. It is also very draining, and thus, I haven't used it much in some time.

I fear that your magic may not be well-developed enough, but I encourage to read up on two other, more powerful Shields. I'll be absolutely shocked if you can manage them by next summer; they are very powerful, and not taught at Hogwarts. They can be dangerous because improper use of them can result in magical exhaustion, a phenomenon you are unfortunately familiar with. They require a precise touch. If you push your magic too hard, you'll drain yourself. Too softly, and the shield will not materialize. I'm going to trust you not to attempt them until you feel extremely confident. And if you do exhaust yourself, you are not to try again. I don't want you to get hurt, Harry, and it's only because of the recent events at Hogwarts that I'm willing to take this risk.

You saw one of the spells in action at Flourish and Blotts, used to deflect Malfoy's Slicing Curse. I summoned it wandlessly and nonverbally, an extremely difficult task. I am skilled in many ways, but my ability to create nonverbal and wandless shields is a power that has run in the O'Connor line. My ability is the most refined in almost twenty generations.

The spell I used against Malfoy is only a step above the basic Protego. It is the Deflection Spell. Similar to the Protego Shielding Spell, it is good for only a short period of time. However, it can deflect more powerful spells, and deflects them in random directions. The shield it self is a pyramidal shape instead of a curved oval. It can be dangerous because you can't control the direction the spell is fired in. It will be difficult to master, but not nearly as difficult as the other.

The other spell is called the Servos Shield, a spell taught to only the most promising Aurors and Hit-Wizards. It is immensely more complex than the basic Protego. While the wand movement is similar, one basically has to 'will' the shield into existence. It is invisible except when in the proximity of powerful magical energy (i.e., an opponent's curse), when it flashes an ethereal purple-blue. This is a dangerous spell, not only because of the potential for magical exhaustion, but also because it deflects the hostile spell directly back at its castor while using the shield's castor's magical energy to amplify the power. If used correctly, a reflected Stunning Spell could put someone into a coma.

There is another variant, a series of spells which absorb magical power and either dissipate it or actually feed it into the castors spells, but they are extremely difficult and dangerous. You can easily kill yourself by absorbing too much magic. I am not going to teach you those until I feel you are ready.

I hope I answered some questions, Harry. By the way, Andromeda and Nymphadora are going to spend Christmas with us at the Manor. Hermione is welcome to come if she wants, just ask her parents first. The same goes for Ginny. I've exchanged a few owls with Molly, and she's quite pleased that Ginny has such good friends.

*And Harry, if you are teaching her dueling spells, stop. It's for your own good. Because I promised Molly that you **wouldn't** be doing anything but helping her study and keeping her company. She's not a woman I particularly want on my case.*

Remember, I'm always there for you.

Daphne

Harry entered the Gryffindor Common Room for the First Time without the fear of being hexed. Of course, Ron and company were across the room glaring death at him, but he ignored them. What was important was that Fred and George were currently sitting on either side of Ginny, and the young redhead was laughing hysterically at something. Harry smiled; he was glad that it hadn't taken long for them to treat her as their sister. Weasley might take a couple of centuries, but was that really a loss? He could do without the boy breathing down his neck about hurting his 'baby sister.' Harry rather hoped that Ron would get introduced to Ginny's Striking Curse, preferably in the nether regions.

That thing was vicious. She may have been inconsistent at the Stunning Spell and incapable of performing the Shielding Charm, but her *Percutio* could knock Harry flat. And it had, on several occasions, done just that.

"Hey Harry!" George called over. Harry had figured out enough distinguishing features to tell them apart. At this point, Fred had worse acne and a slightly larger nose. George had a faint scar on his left cheek that could have been from anything from a paper cut to a scratch by a cat.

"Hi George," he called back.

"How on earth-"

"-did you get so good-"

"-At telling us apart?" They said in unison.

“Trade secret,” Harry said, smirking. Fred and George nodded. They had plenty of ‘trade secrets’ of their own. Such as how they have gotten into the Slytherin Dorms several times to play pranks. Marcus Flint had woken up with his short black hair matching Lockhart’s platinum blond, and Tracey Davis had awoken with ankles the size of Hagrid’s legs. She’d barely fit out the door.

Of course, they’d never admitted to being the culprits, but Harry could think of no one else.

“Don’t worry Harry-“ George began

“-we’ve got plenty of our own,” Fred finished.

“Just curious, are you two telepathic in any way? I suppose that prolonged exposure to one another might make you capable of thinking alike, but still...”

George gasped. “You say that as if it’s a bad thing!”

“Which?” Harry asked. “The being inseparable, or the thinking alike thing? Because I assure you, your ability to think alike *is* a bad thing for most of the students in this school.”

“Harry, you’re encouraging them,” Ginny said. The twins did indeed have delusions of grandeur shining through their identical blue eyes. They were probably planning a majestic school-wide prank that would either fail miserably and get them expelled, or succeed beyond their wildest expectations and make them legends. Or get them killed by Harry’s Head of House.

“I’m sure you’ve noticed-“

“-that you haven’t been the recipient-“

“-of one of our lovely wake-up calls?” They said together. Ginny rolled her eyes.

“Don’t answer that, Harry. Any answer you give will result in your being pranked at the next opportunity. You won’t be safe anywhere.”

Fred and George gaped, then smiled sadly. "She's catching onto us, Fred."

"Indeed she is, brother of mine. Perhaps-"

"-Ickle Ginnikinns might wake up tomorrow with her hair...oh I don't know, blue perhaps?"

"An excellent idea, brother. Though perhaps not if we value our manhoods," George said, eyeing the look of pure venom their sister was giving them.

"If you two dare to hex me..." she hissed, leaving the threat open. Fred and George jumped.

"Well, that was-"

"-a wee bit terrifying."

Harry smirked. "She's not one to cross. Trust me."

George frowned. "What have you been teaching her, Potter?" he asked, his voice turning cold as he used Harry's surname.

"Just some basic things," Ginny lied smoothly.

"You always were a good liar, Ginny," Fred said.

"But we're not as gullible as Mum," George finished.

Harry's mind raced as he tried to figure out a way to defuse this situation. He was really hoping to repair the rifts between Ginny and her brothers, not blow them wide open, and direct the anger back on him. "Do you really want to know?" he asked softly. "It was her idea, by the way," he added. At the look Ginny gave him, "What? It was!" he protested. Ginny sighed.

"Yes, I believe we do, Potter. Because if you've been teaching her things she shouldn't know, I think we'll be right unhappy with you," George said.

“Yeah, what have you been corrupting my sister with, Potter?” Ron snarled, angrily stomping his way into the conversation.

Ginny was turning red, and not with embarrassment. “Stop it! Leave him alone! The worst thing I’ve learned is a Striking Curse. He hasn’t been teaching me Unforgivables, for Merlin’s Sake!”

George suddenly grinned. “The Striking Curse?”

“Wicked,” Fred said, grinning back at him. “I daresay that will be *useful* for boys who can’t keep their hands where they should...”

“FRED!” Ginny cried, turning bright red. Harry raised his hands.

“It’s not going to be me. Don’t worry about that,” Harry said truthfully. Ginny turned a brighter red as what he was talking about went through her mind.

“HARRY! THAT’S NOT HELPING!”

“C’mon Ginny,” Ron said gruffly, yanking his sister away from him. “Let’s get away from the bloody-“

Ginny spun out of his grasp, and in a fluid motion Daphne would have been proud of, cast, struck hard. Ron collapsed to the ground as Ginny’s elbow slammed into his gut. “*Why don’t you stay away from me, you great git?*”

This time, she grabbed Harry by the arm, and hauled him out of the Common Room, past a flabbergasted looking Hermione. She yanked him through the open portrait hole and collapsed against the wall, breathing heavily. She ducked her head, and when she raised it, there were tears in her eyes.

“Why won’t he just accept it? Why is he so bloody stubborn?” she asked to no one.

“I don’t know,” Harry said truthfully.

He pulled the redhead into an embrace, which she returned with crushing strength. When Fred and George emerged from the portrait

hole, their drawn wands probably indicating they had hexed their brother, they froze at the sight of their sister in Harry's arms, then smiled appreciatively at them and left, no doubt to offer them some privacy.

They would never know how much that meant to both of them.

Lockhart's brilliant idea for combating the Heir of Slytherin was nothing less idiotic than starting a Dueling Club. To be honest, Harry had been slightly surprised there had been none, so he'd read up on the subject. The Dueling Club had existed for over two hundred years until 1977. And unsurprisingly, it had met its untimely end as the result of a duel between a man named Sirius Black and Severus Snape. Both had ended up in St. Mungo's. Black was a name that was familiar to Harry at least. He'd overheard a conversation Daphne had been having with Andromeda during the summer. From what he could tell, Black had been a traitor in the first war, and was in Azkaban. He had also been a friend of James Potter. Harry didn't dwell much on him; after all, the man was rotting in Azkaban, and posed no threat.

Still that these two had dueled each other hard enough to send both to St. Mungo's, and convinced the Board of Governors to ban the Dueling Club had to be significant. Harry knew that Snape was an excellent duelist. And he had a suspicion Black was the other 'duelist feared as much as herself,' in addition to Bellatrix Lestrange, both of whom were incarcerated on the island in the North Sea.

However, he sincerely hoped that Snape would be one of the teachers. Lockhart could kill someone if he tried to do something spectacular. Harry was past wishing that he would kill himself. Other acceptable options would be McGonagall, who was a skilled witch in her youth, and Flitwick, who back when the dinosaurs ruled the earth, was a dueling champion. Or Dumbledore himself.

Harry and Ginny met up with Hermione. All three of them would have an instant advantage over their competition from the private training they'd been undergoing.

Both Harry and Ginny were probably the most powerful witches of their respective years. And Hermione was likely just as good as Malfoy or Nott, who had private training before they came to Hogwarts and the two summers since. When magical training was started very early in life, one's magic developed much faster. Daphne had probably made the wise choice to let Harry have ten wonderful years as James Dressler before he was thrust into the world as the Boy-Who-Lived.

They entered the Great Hall, where the tables had been shoved to side of the room, and in the center was a long table draped with colorful banners. Harry had to admit he was surprised; he was expecting a dueling ring. *Perhaps this affords the spectators a better view?*

Sure enough, standing on the platform, wearing bright magenta robes and that disgusting grin, was Gilderoy Lockhart.

Standing next to him, with a look like he ate something that disagreed with him, and was planning to brew a potion that would eat one's internal organs once this farce was over, was Severus Snape. As Harry entered, Snape gave him a curt nod, as if acknowledging the presence of a real duelist in the crowd of dunderheads. Harry gave him an evil grin, and indicated the presence of his friends. Snape raised his head in condescending disgust.

"Can't they just finish each other off?" Ron Weasley's voice came from the crowd. Harry slipped into the crowd, hoping for a good view of today's 'festivities.'

"Well, if one survives, I'd rather it be the one that can actually duel. Snape may be a git to the Gryffindors, and occasionally to me, but he's a good fighter," Harry pointed out.

Ron spun around. "What are you doing here?"

Harry smirked. "Attending the Dueling Club?"

"Will you two give it a rest?" Hermione cried exasperatedly, hauling Ginny through the crowd.

"No," Harry and Ron said simultaneously. Harry smirked while Ron glared at him.

"If you don't quiet down you're going to miss the show," Theodore Nott cut in. "I personally am looking forward to seeing Professor Snape manhandle that git."

Greengrass sneered. "That Dumbledore hired that man clearly shows he's losing his touch. My father knows of a half-dozen more qualified applicants. But Dumbledore won't accept a Dark Wizard as a candidate." She turned and walked away with Nott, presumably offended by the company.

Ron gaped, before spluttering. "Why the bloody hell should he? It's them we're learning to fight!" he exclaimed. He turned to Ginny. "This is the crowd you hang out with?"

"I don't count Greengrass among my friends, Ron," she replied angrily. "Not that you-"

"She does have a point though," Harry cut in. "Contrary to what every Gryffindor believes, one can be Dark without following Voldemort. They'd actually be even more qualified, as they practice what they teach."

"Of course you'd say that," Ron snapped. "What with an 'aunt' that uses the Unforgivables!"

Harry rounded on him, his eyes flashing with malice. "Daphne lost *everything* to Voldemort, you ignorant *bastard*." His wrist snapped, and his wand flew into his hand. Hermione drew her own wand and stepped between them.

"Harry, calm down. He isn't worth it. Let him go," she pleaded. Harry took a deep breath and felt the rage bleed away. He tried to shove the rest of the emotion to the back of his mind.

He gave Ron a calculating look. "No, Hermione, you're right. He isn't worth *anything*."

Ron fled with a whimper.

As Hermione opened her mouth, presumably to berate her best friend, Lockhart's voice boomed out from atop the platform. "Can everyone see me? Can everyone hear me?"

Without pausing for a reply, he rubbed his hands together excitedly. "Welcome to our little Dueling Club, designed to test your magical ability and spell work, and allow you to better defend yourself against your enemies. As all of you know, I am Professor Lockhart, and this is my assistant, Professor Snape."

Without breaking his venomous glare at his colleague, Snape nodded curtly.

"The two of us will be holding a demonstration duel...fear not, you will still have your Potions Professor in one piece when I'm finished with him, he said, laughing merrily. Harry thought that Lockhart was either a very good actor, or even more idiotic than he thought. Snape was sending him a glare that would send any sane person running in the opposite direction. Ginny whispered something to Hermione, and the bushy-haired girl stifled a laugh.

The two Professors each walked to the other side of the platform. "Now, we begin with a bow. Severus...?"

Snape bowed quickly, and then dropped into a classic dueling stance, his expression completely neutral. Harry's earlier suspicions were confirmed; the man was clearly an expert at this. Lockhart made a comically poor imitation of Snape's motion.

"*EXPELLIARMUS!*" Lockhart cried. Snape lazily waved his wand in a circular motion and the spell was absorbed. It was clearly one of the advanced shields that Daphne had told him about.

"*Abrumpo,*" he drawled lazily. The Slicing Curse shot out of his wand, twice as thick as it normally was, boosted by the energy of Lockhart's spell. The fraud's eyes went wide, and he ducked out of the way. The spell hit the opposite wall and carved a deep gash. Had Lockhart not moved, it would have taken his head off.

He struggled to his feet and tried to regain his composure, putting on a blatantly false smile, wiping the sweat from his brow and

straightening his robes. "An excellent example of a very powerful curse, Severus. Perhaps a bit much for students, but nonetheless, I could have dodged at any time."

Severus's smirk vanished. "I beg to differ, Gilderoy. *You were shaking in your boots,*" he said slowly and softly in a poisonously sweet tone. Harry grinned widely. Lockhart looked horrified.

"Alright then, Severus. Thank you for the commentary... now, I want you to pair up, and just try to see what you can do!" He said in an excited voice, obviously believing that he'd found a way to salvage the situation. Harry's eyes widened. Even Snape looked horrified. Unfortunately, before he could say something, the students were chattering loudly as they chose partners. Harry gestured to Hermione, while Ginny sought an opponent of equal strength to her own abilities. She ended up settling on Luna Lovegood, a curious choice, to say the least.

As the chaos began around them, Harry faced Hermione, wand drawn, and gave a short bow. She returned it, and dropped into the dueling stance that Harry had taught her. She struck first. "*Stupefy!*"

"*Protego!*" Harry cast. The red jet of Hermione's Stunning Spell connected with the shield, flashed blue, and was deflected into the floor. "*Expelliarmus!*"

Hermione dodged the Disarming Spell, and fired back another Stunner, which Harry sidestepped. "*Petrificus Totalis!*" "*Lumos!*"

Even in the bright light of the Great Hall, the Lighting Charm momentarily blinded Hermione, and the split second it cost her was enough for the first hex to hit her. Her arms and legs snapped together and she fell to the ground. Harry walked over to her. "*Finite Incantatem.*" Hermione's limbs fell from her sides, and she pushed herself to her feet, grumbling.

"You've never done *that* before!" Hermione cried.

Harry smirked. "That's the point. You weren't expecting it."

He took a look around to see how his fellow students were doing. Predictably, it was unrestrained chaos. Seamus and Ron *had* been dueling, but were now aggressively wrestling one another. Dean was frantically apologizing to Parvati Patil for doing *something* that broke her nose, while Lavender yelled at him, her own partner, Padma, forgotten. Lavender was also sporting boils from someone's hex. Justin Finch-Fletchely and Ernie Macmillan were still on their feet, but neither one appeared to know any spells. Nott and Greengrass were firing away at one another, both unable to land any spells. Malfoy had soundly beaten Crabbe, and by the looks of it, Goyle as well. Zabini was laughing as he levitated Moon in midair. Pansy and Millicent were standing off to the side, angrily glaring at Lockhart instead of fawning over him as usual.

Yes, chaos was the best word to describe it.

Lockhart was appealing for calm. Snape was watching amusedly, leaning against a wall. Finally, he lazily raised his wand and created a loud BANG which froze the room. Lockhart smiled seemingly gratefully at Snape, but there was an undercurrent of outrage and panic. Snape smirked back.

"Well, that didn't...quite go as planned," he said. "Why don't we treat you how to protect yourselves from unfriendly spells? How about a volunteer pair, say...Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter!" he exclaimed, showing the depth of his stupidity.

"I don't think so, Gilderoy. Whatever's left of Weasley will be sent to the Hospital Wing in a matchbox, and Potter would be bound for Azkaban...no, I believe a proper demonstration is in order. Potter and Draco Malfoy, now that's a match-up I'm inclined to watch. Care to match a pureblood education against your 'independent study,' Potter?"

So Snape did know he'd been practicing in private. Not surprising, he was a Legillimens, and something told Harry that Snape wouldn't resist skimming Harry's surface thoughts. He knew it hadn't been anything deeper; he could recognize the probing of a Legillimens, and he had reason to believe that Daphne had commanded Dumbledore to control his Potions Master.

Hermione looked concerned. Ginny looked pleased. "Of course, Professor, he said, jumping onto the platform and taking his position across from where Malfoy was standing. The two rivals eyed each other coldly, but it was not a look of hatred, but of mutual respect, with quite a bit of mutual dislike. It was the expression of two adversaries who knew they were evenly matched.

Snape had taken command of the lesson. When Lockhart approached to offer 'assistance,' Harry waved him off. He got the message, and a dark look flickered in his eyes. One that caused Hermione much concern. *I knew he was dangerous.*

"Very well. Mist^{ers} Potter and Malfoy have not yet managed to bungle this. I expect both know the next step, considering their...heritage," he said silkily.

Harry locked eyes with Malfoy, and the boy's grey eyes locked with his own. Simultaneously, they lowered their upper bodies, keeping eye contact for the entire bow. Harry dropped into a dueling stance, his weight evenly distributed, one foot forward, his wand pointed toward the ceiling to make it more difficult for him to be disarmed. Malfoy favored a stance that put his weight more on his front foot, making it more difficult to be knocked backward.

"Excellent," Snape said softly. "Begin!" he barked.

Malfoy took a step forward. "Ready, Potter?"

"What else would you expect, Malfoy?" he asked, his eyes narrowing.

"*Diffindo!*" Malfoy cast. Harry dove out of the way of the Cutting Curse, and on one knee, cast his best. "*Percutio!*"

Malfoy tried to dodge, but the spell caught him in the right arm, spinning him around.

"*Lumos!*" "*Stupefy!*" Harry cast in rapid succession. Malfoy shielded his eyes, but had evidently seen Harry take down Hermione. "*Protego!*" The red jet flashed blue and was reflected back at Harry, who dodged it.

“Densageo!” Harry reflected the Longtooth Hex into the ceiling. He supposed it would be rather distracting to have your teeth growing to the size of broomsticks.

Harry fired a Stunner, then aimed lower and fired another. Malfoy dodged the first, but the second caught him in the ankle, slowing him. *“Caecus!”*

Whatever Draco was expecting, it wasn't the Blinding Hex. He staggered around drunkenly, then aimed his wand in Harry's direction. *“DIFFINDO! DIFFINDO! DIFFINDO!”* he bellowed.

The white disks of magic, boosted by Malfoy's fury and developed magical power, might as well have been Slicing or Severing Curses. The first two Harry met with a Shielding Spell, but the impact knocked him backwards, saving him from a direct hit by the third. It still grazed his arm, and Harry felt a brand dragged across his upper arm and the warm blood begin to soak his robes. Meanwhile, Malfoy had ended the Blinding Hex.

“REDUCTO!” Harry's Blasting Curse shot forth as a solid mass of white light, and hit at Malfoy's feet, blowing the platform to splinters and knocking the pureblooded heir backwards. Several people screamed from the violence of the explosion, and Snape's eyes widened in calculating surprise. Harry was the most shocked; he'd never cast *anything* that powerful. The pain from his arm began to bleed through his mind, just as his blood-soaked robes were dripping on the dueling platform.

Malfoy somehow got to his feet, his eyes blazing. *“SERPENTSORTIA!”*

Harry had to admit he was impressed that the second year could manage the advanced Serpent Summoning Spell; conjuring creatures wasn't taught in Transfiguration until the N.E.W.T. level.

A green rope of magic landed on the ground just over the gaping hole in the platform floor, and with a flash, transformed into a highly poisonous black asp. The obsidian scales of the two-foot long serpent glistened in the light, and its yellow eyes scanned its surroundings, forked tongue testing the air, baring two long, deadly fangs.

Unfortunately, Malfoy didn't seem to have any control over his creation.

The snake went directly at the first thing it saw, baring its long, slender fangs directly at the face of Ron Weasley, who appeared to be paralyzed. Harry realized that the eyes of the magical asp might have hypnotic powers.

He wasn't sure why he did it, but nonetheless. "*Back off!*" he hissed.

Harry knew he had spoken Parseltongue the second it emerged from his mouth. He understood it as English, but the subtle hissing that actually escaped his mouth and the snake's compliance told him all that he needed to know.

He didn't know how he could, nor why. Not that it mattered, he needed to make that snake back off so that he could blast it. "*Stay away from the red-haired one. Come to me,*" he hissed at the snake.

"Yes, *Speaker,*" it hissed back. Harry ignored the gasps and shocked looks of friends and foes alike. The snake slithered towards him as he beckoned it.

"*REDUCTO!*" the Blasting Hex blew the poisonous snake into fragments. Harry wasted no time. "*EXPELLIARMUS!*" Malfoy wasn't at all prepared, and the wand came sailing out of his adversary's hand. Harry caught it with his left arm, grimacing at the pain. Then, he looked at Snape, tossed the wand back to Malfoy, jumped off the platform, and focusing his vision straight ahead, strode out of the Great Hall. Hermione and Ginny were right behind him.

Harry reached the corridor to the Entrance Hall and collapsed against the cool stone wall, wiping his brow and grimacing from his injured shoulder which felt like it was on fire.

Ginny came flying up the corridor, her eyes burning with fury. "*What did you tell that snake to do to my brother?*" she demanded.

"I told it to leave him alone, then asked it to come to me so that I could blast it...You should be thanking me, if that thing bit him he

probably wouldn't survive," Harry answered gravely. Ginny nodded, though she still looked visibly upset.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Hermione asked, coming up behind her and placing a hand on the redhead's shoulder.

"Because I didn't know. I swear. I've never spoken to a snake in my life...damn it this is such a bloody mess. Now the whole bloody *school* will think I'm the Heir," he grumbled, resisting the urge to punch the wall.

"A good idea, Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said, obviously skimming his thoughts again. It was highly likely that he couldn't help it; highly trained and sensitive Legillimens could read an unshielded mind without eye contact or intent.

"What?" Ginny asked.

Snape smirked. "Mr. Potter was fighting down the urge to punch the wall. I believe the wall would win." His smile vanished. "My office. *Now.*"

He turned to go, then stopped. "Your arm, Potter." Harry extended the arm, grimacing from the pain. "*Sano.*" Harry felt a slight burning sensation, and watched as the wound glowed with inner white light, and the skin mended itself. Snape spun around, and began to walk towards the Entrance Hall, his cloak billowing behind him.

Leaving his two friends behind him, Harry helplessly followed his Head of House down into the dungeons.

Chapter 9: The Darkness Within

Harry followed Snape down into the dungeons, trying to calm his racing heart. He had no idea what Snape wanted to talk to him about; surely, this was not simply about being a Parselmouth. Harry knew that Voldemort had been one, and due to Snape's history as a Death Eater, Harry had noticed that the Head of Slytherin House was rather uneasy when confronted with reminders of his past.

Though he supposed that Snape had good reason to.

It was a strange relationship that Harry and Snape had. For the majority of the past year, Snape had been downright vicious, taking out over eleven years of stored anger with James Potter on his son. It didn't seem to matter that outside of phenomenal natural flying ability, Harry was nothing like his father.

Daphne didn't talk that much about James's days at Hogwarts except in the context of his relationship with Lily. For that, Harry guessed that his father had been less than a model citizen. He already knew about the Marauders from a few brief mentions, and from a combination of Daphne's disapproving tone and a few pieces of conversations, Harry gathered that they had been a bunch of extremely gifted troublemakers in the mold of Fred and George Weasley.

Daphne's entire attitude towards James Potter was somewhat difficult to determine, really. She certainly disapproved of the man he had been before he'd settled down with Lily. While she didn't speak of him with the same reverent tone as she did with Lily or Edmond, she'd liked him, and perhaps even loved the man he had become. Lily's death, on the heels of Daphne's husband, had shaken her faith and will beyond anything else she'd ever experienced, or so he understood from when Daphne would speak of it. Still, her attitude towards Harry's father had certainly changed from that during his school days.

But he knew enough to know that while he was the splitting image of his father on the outside, down to the same haircut, on the inside, they were as different as two Light wizards could be.

Snape might have started to see that, or perhaps Daphne had threatened him. The latter was unlikely, given that they had gotten into a rather loud argument in the Hospital Wing after Harry had nearly been killed going after the Philosopher's Stone. From what he'd heard, it seemed like this had been something that had been brewing for a long time, not a continuation of an earlier confrontation. Either way, about two months prior to the end of the previous year, Snape had had at least a partial change of heart. He'd taken to simply ignoring Harry, including punishing Malfoy for trying to sabotage his Cleaning Potion by lobbing in an ingredient that would have had...unfortunate results.

His apathy to all things concerning Harry had carried over to this year. He was actually doing well in potions, and while eliciting praise from him was possibly more difficult than getting Greengrass to show emotion, he'd appeared mildly pleased at the results of Harry and Hermione.

"Are you just planning to stand there, Potter?" Snape asked impatiently. Harry was jolted out of his thoughts, and muttered a quick apology. He entered the office, and Snape strode past him, taking a seat behind his desk. He gestured at the chair he had Summoned to across from where he sat. "Sit, Potter." Harry complied.

Snape steeped his fingers, and then rose from his chair. When Harry made to get up, he gestured for him to stop. He began pacing, mumbling under his breath. Harry tried to reel in his emotions; he needed to be stoic for this to not turn into a disaster.

"What, exactly, did you just do, Potter?" he asked in a deadly calm voice.

"You know what I did, sir," Harry replied evenly. "I spoke Parseltongue, and managed to charm the snake so that I could blast it."

"You make it sound so innocent, Mr. Potter. I hope that I have not severely overestimated your intelligence. Tell me, Mr. Potter, what did you just do?" he asked again.

Harry saw what he wanted, and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "I just revealed my ability to use a magical power that is both classified as Dark and widely feared, sir," he said confidently.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter. *I feared we might be here for hours...* I'll make the assumption neither you nor your *guardian* knew about this..."

"You would be correct, sir. I did not know that I was a Parselmouth...and I understand why this is not a positive event, especially at this time," Harry said, trying to keep his voice level and respectful. Snape still looked at him and saw his father. Behaving in a polite and mature fashion that was unheard of for the elder Potter was an excellent start, and a way to make this conversation more...pleasant than it might be.

"Than perhaps there is hope for you. I'm still not entirely certain why you are a Slytherin, Potter. But I can understand why you aren't a Gryffindor...yes, you can consider that a compliment. I daresay that if you don't, we might have some...additional troubles..." he said softly, his voice trailing off in an unvoiced promise to make Harry's life rather awful if he didn't act in the best interests of his own House.

"I'm proud to be a Slytherin, Professor. I know that I can achieve the most here."

Snape actually smiled for an instant before it returned to his normal sneer. Perhaps he felt he was winning a victory over his long dead nemesis by transforming his son into what he disliked the most. *Let him take whatever credit he feels like.*

"I'm...pleased to hear that...but to more important topics, Potter. You are well aware of the animosity between your despicable father and me, I assume. Fortunately, it seems that Dressler has taught you not to idolize him, as I feared."

Harry met Snape's gaze. "My father was not a saint, sir. Daphne believes he became a better person, but was not fond of him in school. I cannot judge him, as I have precious few memories of him."

"Ah...well, you seem to be a bit uneducated concerning your father's *greatness*, but nonetheless, perhaps we might be able to coexist after

all, Potter. With the exception of a rather unfortunate *incident* last year, you've done quite bit for this House. I hope to see more of it in the future."

"Pardon me, sir, but I don't think you ordered me in here to improve our relationship...nor to taunt me if I wasn't so...accepting," Harry pointed out. Snape nodded.

"Indeed, Potter. I would like to know where you were on the night of the Halloween Feast," Snape said, in a tone that clearly said it was an order, not a request.

"Do you really want me to, sir? I assure you that I had nothing to do with it. I was in the Slytherin Dormitories, sleeping."

Snape's face hardened. "You're lying, Potter. Your nervousness and uncertainly alone gives that away. What were you doing?"

Harry swallowed. "I...I have nightmares, sir. And I hadn't been feeling well..."

"Potter, I'm ordering you. *What are you hiding from me?*" Snape demanded angrily.

Harry blew out a long breath. "I...something happened that I can't explain...I ended up rather close to the scene of the attack, and passed out. Ginny found me when she was going back down."

"That's impossible, Potter. Someone would have seen you, or more likely, stepped on you," Snape said. "Yet you are telling the truth. Where were you?"

"I was...there's a hidden passageway, a staircase that leads from the dungeons to just outside the library. I found it in my first year."

"Ah...probably on one of your midnight excursions...you should know, Potter, that I regularly allow my students to get away with prowling the castle at night...if they aren't caught," Snape said. Harry breathed a sigh of relief; he hadn't been looking forward to explaining the Mirror of Erised.

"I've used it before like that, yes," he admitted, realizing that Snape would know he was lying. He desperately needed Occlumency Training, but Daphne said that he'd be able to do nothing until he mentally matured...beyond where he was right now, at least.

"So Miss Weasley found you there...and you have no recollection of how or why you were there?" Snape asked disbelievingly.

"You'd know if I was lying, sir," he pointed out.

Snape frowned. "Indeed. Have you reported this to Dressler?" Harry paled. "I'll take that as a no. Really, Potter, it's very *Gryffindor* to approach this the way you are." He spoke of the House as if it was the worst insult imaginable to be associated with.

"It hasn't happened before or since," he lied, remembering the strange dream. *Something about...roosters?* Somehow, Snape didn't pick up on his uncertainty.

"Very well, Potter. It is your life to lose, not mine. I believe our conversation is concluded."

Harry got up. "Professor."

"Potter," he said by way of farewell.

Unfortunately, the student's reaction to Harry's minor 'talent' did not go as well as his first civilized conversation with Professor Snape. Ron was convinced that Harry had tried to kill him as punishment for 'ratting him out.'

He probably would have been rolling on the ground in laughter if it wasn't as serious. Some of the cock-and-ball stories the idiotic Gryffindor thought up were as unbelievable as the things that Lovegood's father printed in the *Quibbler*.

Daphne had been surprised about his ability, and said she was absolutely certain that the Potters had connection to the Slytherin bloodline. She said she'd look into it, but that he should consider the fact that the ability might be very useful one day. She hadn't sounded

concerned, obviously informed enough to know that being a Parselmouth did not make you a Dark Wizard. She did recommend not speaking to another snake in public, though. As if she really had to tell him that.

He wandered into the Slytherin Common room, and saw Ginny sitting in a chair by the fire, a Transfiguration textbook on her lap.

As he approached his friend, he decided to see if she had any insight into her brother's obnoxious behavior.

"Ginny, I have a question," he said, as he sat down in the opposite chair. She looked up and a faint blush appeared on her cheeks, but to her credit it was gone as soon as it appeared. They really were making progress on eradicating her crush, and Harry couldn't be happier. He liked the girl, but he outright refused to associate with her if she'd looked at him as a god. He didn't need groupies to feed his ego.

"What?" she asked cautiously.

Harry sighed. "I was just...I was just wonder if you might be able to tell me why exactly the Hogwarts Rumor Mill revolves around your brother?"

It had always baffled him that Ron seemed to exist merely to make his life miserable. He understood that the boy was probably like Ginny, and grew up with wild tales of his accomplishment. Still, his behavior was just inexplicable.

As was the reason that the Gryffindors, and most of the younger students in the school, believed them.

Ginny looked thoughtful. "It's simple, really," she said shrugging. "He likes the attention."

"What?"

"Harry," she began, closing her book to rid herself of any distractions. Clearly, her subconscious was still determined to impress him, "you have to understand something about our family. We may not have

much money, but, well...we've accomplished a lot. Bill was Head Boy, had superb N.E.W.T.s, and entered an extremely difficult career as one of the few wizard employees of Gringotts. Charlie wasn't quite the scholar that Bill was, but most people around here said he was the best Seeker that Gryffindors had in ages, and he was very popular. He also was renowned for his rapport with magical creatures...Percy...well, he's a git sometimes, well, he's basically ignored me this entire school year, but his marks are great, and everybody who works there who has met him says he's ticketed for a high-ranking position in the Ministry someday. Fred and George are really popular with the school in general, even with the pranks; even some people in this house still find them amusing from time to time...." She was rambling now, and Harry took pity on her.

"And they're geniuses," Harry concluded. "Absolutely brilliant, those two are. Bet your mum wishes they used it for something other than tormenting the teachers and Filch, though."

Ginny laughed. Harry reflected again on how dramatic the change had been from the shy girl who'd accidentally wandered into the train compartment of Harry Potter. She just seemed so relaxed around him, and she really was fun to be around. She'd been spending quite a bit of time lately with her roommates, something that Harry was grateful for. It wasn't that he minded having her around, but he didn't want her to limit herself. Even Harry and Hermione spent a lot of time with the 2nd Year Ravenclaws in the library. He'd even had a conversation with Neville Longbottom. Before, of course, Weasley had dragged him away.

Ginny was speaking again, and Harry mentally cursed himself for getting lost in his thoughts. "Sorry, Ginny...could you repeat that?"

She looked at him strangely, but did so anyway. "I just said that even I have something going for me, being the only girl in the family, Mum just fawns over me. Also," she said, going slightly red, "I've seen pictures of Mum as a teenager and she was...very pretty..." Harry had to compliment her on managing to look at him while saying that.

"I get the picture, Ginny," Harry said, laughing. The redhead's blush worsened.

"Anyway..." she said, trying to change the subject from her future looks. "I just think that Ron is really jealous of everyone else in the family. He's not an idiot..." Harry coughed.

"...Oh fine!" Ginny huffed. "He is an idiot, especially when it comes to you...but what I meant is that he could be a pretty good wizard, I think. But he doesn't have Bill's intellect or Percy's drive or Charlie's athletic ability...."

"I get the idea. I never really thought about it like that, to be perfectly honest...not that it changes my opinion of him much," Harry admitted.

Ginny sighed. "I know that...did I answer your question?" she asked hopefully. Harry rolled his eyes.

"You know you did, Ginny," Harry said exasperatedly. Ginny frowned. "What?"

"Nothing," she said. "Really, it's nothing."

...Goblin rebellions throughout the centuries have been due to a number of causes, and have varied greatly in both length and violence. However, the root cause remains unaddressed. In fact, the current system that Goblins are held under, dating back to the end of the Goblin Rebellion of 1838, continues to hold them down as inferior to wizards. While the full extent of Goblin autonomy is unknown, as they do not allow wizards to observe sessions of their government (for good reason), it is believed that the Ministry continues to underestimate Goblins and Goblin magic...

"Very angry Hermione incoming," Ginny commented, looking up from her homework.

They were in the library, with Harry reading up on an extremely rare and heavily criticized book: *Goblins: Creatures Deserving of Equality*, one of the few wizarding books on the subject that depicted the Ministry as ignorant and the Goblins as a noble race of powerful magical creatures. Daphne swore by it, and had sent it to him after he'd been unable to find anything of the sort in the Hogwarts Library.

Harry glanced up. Hermione was walking...well, no; *stalking* would be the right word, into their corner of the library, her cheeks flushed with anger, and her brown eyes burning with indignation and rage. She also appeared to have tears in her eyes.

Harry had seen Hermione like this before. And every single time, it had ended up with a red handprint on Ron Weasley's face from where she'd slapped him.

"I do not *believe* him!" she cried angrily. Ginny winced.

"What did Ron do this time?" she asked exasperatedly.

"That...*git* tried to recruit me to make him Polyjuice Potion!" she cried. "He actually believed that I help him spy on you!"

Ginny's eyes burned with anger. "What did he want it for?" she asked in a deadly calm voice.

Hermione took a deep breath. "He wants to get into the Slytherin Common Room to figure out if Harry or Malfoy is the Heir of Slytherin...he, had the *nerve* to say that I was in danger if it was you, and I should help him! Then he said that we'd get a bloody award!" Harry got up and pulled the nearly hysterical girl into an embrace.

"Relax, Hermione. Do you really think that that idiot will be able to brew it on his own?" Harry said reassuringly as he let her go. She sat down in her customary chair.

"Of course not, bloody idiot couldn't make a Swelling Solution...but that doesn't matter! I can't believe he'd think I'd...betray you like that!" she cried. Ginny walked over and patted her on the back.

"Hermione, does it really matter at all what he thinks? Sometimes, I'd think the world would be better if he didn't think at all, though..." Hermione laughed a bit.

"I'm sorry, Harry...it just really gets to me when people think I'd betray you like that...and that's without mentioning the fact that that potion is Banned."

“It’s okay...anyway; did you get to the Transfiguration homework? I’m actually having some trouble with it.”

Hermione relaxed, back to a situation that she was comfortable in. “Well, to Transfigure lead, you must....”

“CHASER AND CAPTAIN FLINT!...AAAAND SEEKER HARRY POTTER!” Lee Jordan bellowed into his magical microphone. Harry mounted his broom and flew out onto the pitch, doing a couple of sharp turns to get himself warmed up. The fact that it made the Slytherins cheer louder wasn’t a bad thing either.

Harry flew towards the center of the pitch, where the aforementioned Marcus Flint, who had failed to both graduate the previous year and kill his team two years in a row, was extending his hand towards the burly Gryffindor 6th year Quidditch Captain with a menacing grin on his face.

After yet another ‘friendly’ handshake where the two large boys tried to break each other’s fingers, Hooch blew her whistle, and the game began.

Once again, Gryffindor’s superb Chasers had them off to an early lead. Warrington wasn’t nearly as good as Bletchley, and Flint had threatened to kick him off the team on more than one occasion. Unfortunately, there were no better candidates.

The Gryffindor Chasers took advantage. Seconds after Hooch’s whistle, Angelina Johnson was streaking towards the Slytherin goal. Unfortunately, Harry’s diversionary effort the previous year when he had nearly rammed the Black girl was actually illegal, and punishable by ejection from the game. Harry didn’t want to know what Flint would do to him if he got thrown out of a game against the Lions.

While Katie Bell hung back, harassing the Slytherin Chasers and drawing off the Beaters, Johnson and Spinnett headed directly for Warrington. After a rather pathetic feint by Spinnett, the Quaffle was sailing past Warrington’s outstretched hands, and Gryffindor had a 10-0 lead.

No sooner had Lee Jordan announced the score (loudly), than the Gryffindor section exploded in cheers again, as Katie Bell picked off a lazy pass by Flint to Pucey and drove it home past a dazed Warrington.

Harry tore his attention from the game, and one more time avoided a Bludger that seemed to have taken a particular liking to him. Bole flew in and batted it away towards Ron Weasley, who managed to avoid it, but just barely. Harry spun his broom about sharply, and set off on a patrol, again dodging the same Bludger, as Derrick this time hammered it back at the Gryffindors.

Pucey and Flint managed to break free of Fred and George Weasley, and drove home the first Slytherin goal. Lee Jordan commented on the near-collision between Montague and Wood (in the context that it was illegal and Montague should be thrown out) rather colorfully, and McGonagall had to seize the microphone as the Slytherins began to boo loudly.

Harry dodged the rather annoying Bludger once more, and flew off towards the other end of the pitch, both out of boredom and a primal desire to see Ron Weasley 'eating turf' as Tanner put it.

Harry was good, but not quite good enough to feel comfortable with a full-out Wronski Feint. Still, he could do quite a few things. Streaking straight at the ground, he saw Ron turn to follow him out of the corner of his eye. Apparently, the ordeal of McGlaggen, his predecessor, hadn't fully registered with the redhead. He wondered if Ginny would cheer or boo if Ron actually *caught* the Snitch.

Probably the latter; she'd been right furious with him for his attempt to coerce Hermione into betraying them. As useless as the Bat-Bogey was in combat, it was not particularly fun to be under. He'd never had the 'pleasure' of being under it, of course, but it was just cruel. *Who the bloody hell invented a spell that animated your bogeys and made them attack you?*

With Ron bearing in after him, Harry continued his descent. Seconds before impact, he twisted away, skimming dangerously close to the teacher's stands. Ron wasn't so lucky, not hitting flush with the ground, but taking the McGlaggen approach and bouncing before

crashing into the stands. Wood called a timeout as soon as he saw his Seeker go down.

Harry glanced up at the scoreboard, and saw that it was 70-30 Gryffindor. As usual, the Slytherin Chasers simply couldn't keep up with their Lion counterparts. Flint called a time out, and began berating his team. Harry lazily drifted over, only to have to dive suddenly to avoid the Bludger that just missed his head. Bole saw what was happening and whacked it away before Derrick smothered it.

"WHAT THE BLOODY HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU IDIOTS?" Flint screamed at them. "WARRINGTON, I'VE SEEN SLUGS MOVE FASTER THAN YOU! PUCEY, WHEN I THROW THE BLOOD BALL TO YOU, CATCH IT!...AND POTTER!"

Harry's head snapped up. "What?"

"Why the bloody hell haven't you caught that Snitch yet? I've seen the bloody thing twice already. If Weasley wasn't so awful we have lost already!"

"I'm trying," Harry protested. "Bloody Bludger had taken a liking for me, and I've been dodging it all game." Flint's mask of fury turned in a scowl.

"What did you say, Potter?" he asked, stopping just as he was about to start ranting.

"I said that that Bludger has been all over me, with the Weasleys nowhere in sight. Somebody's fixed it," Harry said evenly. Flint's eyes narrowed.

"Too bad, Potter. If we stop the game, we have to forfeit...SO DEAL WITH IT!"

Harry stifled a retort and spun around. "...*bloody idiot is going to get me killed, no Voldemort necessary...*" he muttered darkly.

Hooch's whistle blew as soon as Weasley was back in the air, looking slightly worse for the wear. He was also glaring daggers at Harry for

tricking him, which was inhibiting his ability to search for the Snitch. The Bludgers were released, and the game restarted.

The Slytherins staged a rally, tying the score with four straight goals before Warrington reverted to his classic form, and the Lions blew the game open with ninety unanswered points. Flint looked like he was ready to have a heart-attack.

Meanwhile, Harry was grateful for Weasley's lack of ability, because he was looking out for the Bludger more than for the Snitch. He dodged it again, with it grazing his shoulder this time.

Then he decided he would 'deal with it,' as Flint had so eloquently ordered him to.

He flew at high speed away from the jinxed ball, and stopped. A flick of his wrist and his wand was in his hand. He took aim, and did something that he realized had a high probability of getting him thrown out of the game. "*REDUCTO!*"

Harry's aim was true as the white beam of his Blasting Hex struck the Bludger dead on, blowing it into fragments. The stadium exploded in boos and cries of disbelief, as well as the occasional cheer from a die-hard Serpent fan.

Hooch's whistle blew, and Harry could hear Wood, the Weasleys, and everyone Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and the majority of the Ravenclaws in the stadium screaming holy hell for his ejection. Harry calmly flew down to where Hooch was, shaking her fist and screaming something. Flint flew toward him, his face a mask of fury.

Before he could open his mouth, Harry beat him to it. "It was jinxed, Flint. If I hadn't blasted it, we wouldn't have won anyway, because I couldn't search for the Snitch while constantly dodging that bloody thing." To his surprise, Flint nodded.

"HARRY POTTER," Madam Hooch screamed. "GET DOWN HERE THIS INSTANT!"

Harry did so. Hooch looked absolutely venomous. "...of *all the cheating, dirty...*Potter, WHY DID YOU JUST DESTROY THAT BLUDGER?"

"It was fixed, Madam Hooch," Flint replied for him. "The thing was targeted for him alone."

"Impossible," she said dismissively. "All of the game balls are locked in my office. *No one* has access to them." She placed her hands on her hips.

"How about a house-elf?" Harry asked, taking a shot in the dark. Though, based upon what he knew of Dobby, this kind of poorly thought-out plan fit him well.

Madam Hooch spluttered. "A *house-elf*?"

"I've got a rather...crazy one, named Dobby, that's been giving me problems this year. He seems to think I'm in danger or something like that...would a house-elf have been able to jinx the Bludger?" Harry asked, crossing his fingers that he might be able to make this work.

"I suppose..." the hawk-eyed woman admitted. "Misters Fred and George Weasley, over here if you please." Fred and George flew over, looking confused.

"If you are throwing him out-" Fred began, pointing at Harry.

"-why'd you call for us and not Wood?" George asked.

"Because I'm not throwing him out...yet...I want to know if the Bludger that Mr. Potter hexed was behaving...erratically. And I want *truthful* answers!" she snapped.

Fred looked thoughtful. "It was pretty tough to hit around, kept veering off course."

"Yeah, I tried to take Flint's head off and it hit Montague in the ar-"

"Enough of that!" she snapped. Then she paused. "Was Mister Potter flying in the direction where the ball veered off to?"

George frowned. "Yeah, he was."

"He's right," Fred said. "Each time we had trouble, Potter was in the direction the Bludger was going...but it couldn't have been fixed..."

Hooch nodded. "Very well, boys. Thank you for your *truthful* answers." She blew her whistle. As she did, Oliver Wood flew over, looking livid.

"HOW IS HE NOT GETTING THROWN OUT?" He demanded angrily. "HE SHOT UP THE BLOODY BLUDGER! THAT'S DEFINITELY ILLEGAL!"

Hooch nodded. "It would be, given normal circumstance...Potter, that still was not the *best* thing to do, and you are paying for that Bludger...but you can stay in the game. Anymore foul play and you are out, *do you hear me?*" Harry nodded. As he flew off, he heard Wood yelling some more, and saw Madam Hooch gesturing at the sky. Wood flew back to his goal post, and Flint smirked at him.

Hooch's whistle blew. And Harry began scanning the skies...

He saw the Snitch down near the Slytherin goalpost...with Weasley right behind it. Harry flattened himself against his broom, and angled his approach. If he got it right, he'd beat Weasley's slower broom to the Snitch. If he didn't, or Weasley showed some actual talent...

"WEASLEY'S SEEN THE SNITCH! HE'S ON IT...AS BELL SCORES, 190-90 GRYFFINDOR! WEASLEY'S REACHING FOR IT..."

Ron locked onto the Snitch, pushing his Cleansweep for all it was worth. He latched one hand onto the handle, reaching out the second...

"...POTTER!"

The Slytherin stands exploded as Harry shot across Weasley's path. When his sightline was clear, the Snitch was nestled in Harry gloved palm. He held it aloft, beaming widely, as Lee Jordan fumed, which prompted McGonagall to pull the microphone out of his hands after a series of expletives.

Harry soared above the pitch, adrenaline pumping through his body. He pumped his fist in triumph, and did a few celebratory dives. He soared down gracefully into a mob of his Slytherin teammates.

After surviving a bruising celebration, Harry flew down to the ground. He'd just dismounted when Hermione crashed into him, pulling him into a ridiculously tight embrace. She let go, yelling something that was lost in the crowd noise. Ginny was standing shyly next to her, but Harry's smile was all that was needed for the small redhead to jump up and wrap her arms around Harry's middle, depriving the boy of more badly needed oxygen.

"OI! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" Ron bellowed, running towards them. Ginny jumped off him as if she had been shocked. Harry didn't think he'd ever seen Weasley as furious as he was at this moment.

"HOW CAN YOU DO THAT GINNY? WE'RE YOUR BROTHERS! HOW CAN YOU BE HAPPY THAT WE LOST! I COULD HAVE BEEN KILLED BY THE BLOODY CHEATING GIT! AND YOU'RE JUMPING INTO HIS BLOODY ARMS!" Fred and George, who looked somewhat dejected, tried to restrain him, but he broke free, rushing over towards them. Hermione stepped in front of Ginny, who rather than being livid, had tears in her eyes. Harry realized that she might be indeed feeling guilty for rooting against her brothers.

Harry stepped in front of both of them, a quick wrist flick shooting his holly and phoenix feather wand into his waiting right hand. "Leave now, Weasley," he said in a deadly quiet voice that somehow carried over the remainders of the Slytherin celebration.

"I don't think so, Potter," he spat. He tried to crane his head around to look at Ginny, but Harry leveled his wand, anger burning in his eyes. A thousand possible painful deaths for the pea-brained Gryffindor flashed through Harry's mind. Instead, a voice spoke out.

"That is *enough*, Mister Weasley," McGonagall snapped, pushing him out of the way. Harry roughly jammed his wand back into the holster, and felt Hermione's hand on his arm. He looked back to see that the bushy-haired girl's other arm was wrapped around a dejected-looking Ginny.

“Mister Potter, Misses Granger and Weasley, kindly leave. I believe that I need to have a little *talk* with Mister Weasley,” McGonagall said. As menacing as Ron had looked seconds ago, he looked small and insignificant now.

Harry patted Ginny on the back and headed off the field toward the changing rooms.

Two weeks later:

“Alright, class. Today we will be brewing a draught that any ape or dunderhead in this classroom should be able to brew without destroying my workspace,” Snape sneered, looking at Neville as he said this.

The boy was legendary for his ability to foul up potions and spells. Considering his heritage, that of a pair of fine Aurors, Harry believed the boy was simply heavily lacking in self-confidence. He might try to befriend him if Weasley didn’t bite his head off when he got within a square mile of any Gryffindors other than Hermione.

“Open to page 134, and read about the Swelling Solution. You will be hard-pressed to foul this up. Anyone who does will receive a failing grade and a detention.”

Once they’d read the brief passage on the uses of the potion (there really weren’t that many), Harry jotted down the list of ingredients and gave it to Hermione to retrieve from the student store cupboard while he brought the cauldron to a boil. Using a useful charm he’d picked up in his reading, he managed to get the water in Hermione’s cauldron to 120 degrees Celsius, the precise temperature needed to create the most potent possible potion. Hermione returned with a tray covered in ingredients.

She sat down. “Do you want to brew it?” she asked.

“Not particularly,” Harry admitted. “And I don’t think we’re risking our grade anymore. Snape’s not nearly as foul to me as he used to be.” Hermione nodded.

They began work on their potion. After adding Lacewing Flies, eye of newt, and Irish weeping grass, the potion was a bright yellow, just as the potions manual described. Hermione allowed herself a contented smile.

Harry looked up to see Snape going around the room, offering scathing critique to the Gryffindors and outrageous compliments to the Slytherins. Harry wondered why the Potions Master was in such a foul mood today.

“...no, Longbottom, the potions is supposed to be *yellow*! I’m not completely sure *what* ingredient that you used, but I’ve never seen a Swelling Solution in any stage of preparation turn *purple*...perhaps you’ve invented a new potion, Longbottom? Care to taste it?” he sneered, moving past the terrified boy.

“...Weasley, Thomas...pitiful. The coloring is five or so shades off...*I heard that Mister Weasley, 10 points from Gryffindor*...now finish before I fail both of you dunderheads...”

“...Greengrass, Nott...acceptable, perhaps a bit too bright, it may not end up quite as potent...”

“Malfoy, Parkinson...excellent,” he complimented. Harry looked over and saw that his rival’s potion was dark green...Weasley was fuming.

“...Brown, Patil...I’m not sure what to make of this stunning *empty* cauldron...I suggest you actually begin making the potion soon...in my detention you’ll get far worse than newt eyeballs under your perfectly manicured nails...”

“...Zabini, Bullstrode...very good, be a bit more precise in chopping up your ingredients...”

“...Moon, excellent as always, you have great promise...and now...”

“Potter, Granger...very good, I see you’ve been doing your reading, Potter, with the temperature control. Five points to Slytherin for extra effort, now start working.” The Potions Master returned to his desk, rifling through student essays and covering them with red ink.

“...Harry?” Harry snapped out of his daydreams and looked up apologetically.

“Sorry, Hermione. Let’s see...add the mulberry seeds now...” Hermione did so.

“Alright, that’s the right color...I think,” Harry said, looking at the text.

“I think we’re okay, Harry,” Hermione said, scrutinizing her own book. “What’s next?” she asked, turning back to the cauldron.

“Five counterclockwise stirs, and then two clockwise,” Harry read from his list. Hermione complied with his instructions. Harry rubbed his eyes, he felt rather tired for the first time in a while.

“What next?” Hermione asked eagerly.

“Um...here, add the crushed Golan horn,” he said sleepily, yawning.

As Hermione dumped the ingredient into the potion, Harry glanced back at the instructions...and realized he had made a mistake. “*Bloody hell*, Hermione...”

Too late. The cauldron began to boil uncontrollably, and a cloud of orange fumes billowed up directly into Hermione’s face. She fell back to the floor, gasping for air, her eyes wide.

“PROFESSOR!” Harry yelled, dropping down to the floor and trying to help his friend. Everyone else in the room abandoned what they were doing as Snape hurried over, carrying a vial of something.

“...of all the bloody students, *my best*,” he murmured. “Open her mouth, Potter,” he snapped. Harry forced her jaw open, and Snape poured a blue potion down her throat. Hermione was still gasping.

“She inhaled those fumes?” Snape asked quickly. Harry nodded. “She’ll live. Hospital Wing, Potter. You’ll be getting a zero.”

Harry nodded quickly and helped his still short-of-breath friend out of the dungeons. As he left, he heard his Head of House yelling.

“...what are *you* looking at? She’s not going to die! GET BACK TO WORK!”

Harry got Hermione to the Hospital Wing without any major problems. She immediately identified that her lungs were scorched, and gave her a few potions. Harry left her after apologizing until she finally glared at him.

He headed down towards the Ravenclaw table and sat down in between Ginny and Lisa Turpin. Ginny frowned. “Where’s Hermione?”

“Potions accident...she’ll be fine, just my carelessness...she’s spending the night,” Harry explained. Ginny nodded gravely.

“That’s too bad,” Lisa commented, spearing a piece of lamb with her fork. “I wanted to talk to her about the Charms homework.”

“I might be able to help you,” Harry offered. “What do you need?”

The girl shook her mane of dark red hair and adjusted her glasses, blinking. “Alright then...do you understand Shrinking Charms? I know we’re not learning them this year, but it’s an extra credit assignment I’m doing for Professor Flitwick. My parents...well, they’re Muggles, and had me ticketed for an engineering career at age eleven. They were excited about magic, but want to know that I’m doing something worthwhile. My Potions grade is dreadful, so I want to do something to impress them.”

Harry nodded. “Hermione’s parents are the same way...I suppose it must be strange for parents to send their eleven year olds into a strange and rather dangerous world, not understanding that wizards mentally mature faster and are capable of surviving much more than the average muggle.”

Lisa nodded. Ginny spoke up. “Well, it’s not just Muggles. Mum was not going to prevent me from going, of course, but I don’t think I’ve seen her so conflicted in my life.” She scowled, something that Harry found adorable with her child-like features. Harry reached out and ruffled her hair. “Hey!”

“Turnabout is fair play. You and Hermione are constantly doing that to me,” Harry pointed out. Lisa laughed.

Ginny glared at him as she roughly tried to neaten up her hair. “The difference being that yours looks good when it’s messy.”

After dinner, Harry dashed up to the Hospital Wing, but Madam Pomfrey said she’d given Hermione a Sleeping Potion, but that she’d mention that he had visited. Harry also dropped off her book so that she could do her homework when she awoke.

He headed back the Common Room and chatted briefly with Ginny, but realized he’d been neglecting Tom for weeks. He hadn’t even mentioned his Parseltongue. *Maybe Tom might have some insights...*

Saying a quick goodbye to the redhead, he climbed onto his bed, and pulled out the plain black diary, that as per his request, now read *H.J. Pottter-Dressler*.

He shut the curtains, lit his wand, and lay flat on his stomach, dipping his quill in ink and beginning to write.

Lisa Hanover Turpin, only daughter and pride and joy of Mary and Theodore, lay awake in her four-poster bed in the 2nd Year Ravenclaw Girls dorm. She clutched the blue sheets closer to herself and rolled over, but she could not calm her racing mind.

It was nothing strange or out of the ordinary. Along with the intelligence that ran in both her father and mother’s families, insomnia was a common problem. She simply couldn’t make her mind shut down and stop thinking up theoretical problems and their solutions.

She sighed, twirling her ash dragon heartstring wand she’d purchased on her eleventh birthday in her fingers, small, harmless blue spark emerging. She’d been ticketed for Ravenclaw since the day she arrived.

She’d managed to find out about the Magical Orientation Convention for Muggleborn Students, and there she had learned about the full extent of the magical world. It had done wonders to convince her

parents, especially when they found out about the ‘Think Tank,’ or the Department of Spell Experimentation and Development.” It was a lofty career goal, but an attainable one.

Rolling over again, she decided that if she wasn’t going to get any sleep tonight, she ought to at least make her night worthwhile. Her thoughts drifted to her Gryffindor friend and fellow muggleborn scholar, Hermione. She’d befriend her and Harry the previous year. She liked the Boy-Who-Lived a lot, and while the rest of the school seemed to fear and revere him, she found him an engaging and mature boy who also had a good sense of humor.

She dug beneath her pillow for a handful of Sugar Quills. She’d introduced Hermione to them a month ago, and she’d been taken with them. Maybe she ought to bring her some in the Hospital Wing?

Well, it was better than sitting around doing nothing; that was for sure.

She slipped into a pair of slippers and whispered Silencing Charm onto both of them, a trick she’d picked up from Harry. She couldn’t wait to learn the Disillusionment Charm, but that was N.E.W.T. level charms.

Creeping silently out of her dormitory, she snuck past a few students who had lost their battle with sleep in a failed all-nighter, and walked through the false mirror that hid the entrance to the Ravenclaw common room. She knew the Gryffindors had the Fat Lady (apparently, if one actually saw her, one could speak the name), the Hufflepuffs had a large tapestry, and the Slytherins had a hidden entrance in the dungeons. She still liked the mirror the best.

She descended a number of staircases until she found herself on the First Floor. Once, she had to duck aside to let Filch through, but no one else stopped her.

As she climbed the stairs that led to the Hospital Wing, she heard something strange.

Some kind of hissing.

She frowned, but it stopped. Then, she noticed that her glasses were filthy. Removing them, she cleaned them with her nightgown and saw the reflection of something.

A black-haired boy, or man, with bright red eyes. And beside him...

Two great bulbous yellow eyes. She felt a tingling come over her, and her vision began to narrow...

Hermione awoke to the sound of hushed voice and a cry of alarm. She blinked a few times, and was relieved to realize that her lungs no longer felt as if they were on fire. Harry had been very careless, but perhaps she only thought that because he was always so impeccable. He'd certainly been sorry for his mistake.

She sat up in bed slightly, peering out the curtains that surrounded her bed. A number of people were standing around something in the dark, speaking in grave tones.

"...found her on the stairs, Albus..."

"...what's wrong with her?" a voice she recognized as Flitwick's squeaked.

"...Petrified...very disturbing indeed..."

"What does it mean, Albus?" a worried-sounding voice that belonged to her Head of House asked. Hermione listened intently.

Dumbledore (there was no one else remotely that tall at the school), sighed wearily. "It means that the Chamber of Secrets had indeed been opened once more...and that we expelled an innocent man..."

"You knew, Headmaster," Snape's icy voice said. "You knew, that's why you kept him in your employ."

"Indeed I did, Severus."

"Lay her down now," Flitwick said. "We'll have to leave her here until the Mandrakes are ready...how long, Severus?"

“Pomona says she’ll have them by May. I’ll have the potion ready in a week.”

“Oh dear, her parents won’t be pleased...”

They placed whoever it was on the bed next to Hermione. As Snape moved aside, he revealed the frozen face of Lisa Turpin. Hermione gasped loudly.

“Ms. Granger?” McGonagall asked, pulling the curtains aside. Her mouth straightened into a thin line. “How much did you hear?”

“Everything,” she admitted. “Sorry.”

“It’s quite alright, Hermione,” Dumbledore said. “I wonder...do you have a liking for Sugar Quills?” Hermione nodded, Lisa had introduced her to them the about a month ago. “Ah, it seems she intended to pay you a visit.” Hermione paled.

“She’ll live, Granger. I recommend you forget what you overheard tonight,” Snape said.

Dumbledore shook his head. “You may tell Mister Potter and Miss Weasley, but I urge you to exercise caution. I highly recommend against telling her Housemates.” Snape looked ready to say something. Dumbledore extended an arm, and Hermione felt magic wash over her. “Sleep well, my child,” he said in a grandfatherly tone.

Once he was sure she was asleep, he turned to Minerva, Filius, and Severus. “You all understand the magnitude of what has occurred. We cannot allow this to become public knowledge, not without causing a panic. No one must know the connection to the events of fifty years ago. You understand this.”

All three nodded. They indeed understood the consequences of what was happening.

For if the attacks continued, and if someone was killed, the Ministry might have no choice but to close the school.

Chapter 10: Weasel's Folly

As was becoming rather customary for Harry, breakfast found him and Ginny being dragged into an empty classroom by a frantic-looking Hermione, who had apparently been released from Madam Pomfrey's care.

Harry had tried to apologize (he'd nearly killed his best friend because of a stupid lapse in concentration), but Hermione waved it off...and then dropped a bombshell, telling them about how Lisa Turpin had been Petrified. Harry was horrified that he'd been talking to her just hours before she was turned to stone.

Hermione seemed rather guilt-ridden. As it turned out, Lisa had been on her way to pay a late-night visit to her fellow Muggleborn, presumably to drop off some sugar quills. Hermione said that Lisa was an insomniac, a trait that ran in her family, and it thus wasn't surprising she'd been prowling the halls at one in the morning.

The conversation that Hermione overheard was also concerning in and of itself. It confirmed that Dumbledore believed that this mythic Chamber of Secrets had been opened, and the Monster of Slytherin unleashed. Harry had suggested that they might try to figure out what might be able to cause Petrification. It was bound to be a short list.

They spent hours day after day searching through the library, but it became obvious that information on anything that could cause such Dark symptoms was unlikely to exist outside the Restricted Section. Strangely, Harry didn't find himself nearly as enthusiastic about finding out what had attacked Lisa and Mrs. Norris as his friends were.

Meanwhile, the disappearance of Lisa Turpin had not gone unnoticed. Most made the connection that she'd been attacked by whatever had Petrified Mrs. Norris. The school remained silent on the subject, despite a number of complaints by students and parents. Even more confusing was that Lisa's parents were spotted entering the Hospital Wing, and emerging looking rather depressed. Still, most believed that Lisa was alive.

What made her disappearance even stranger was that all the Ravenclaw Second Years confirmed that she appeared fine the night

of her disappearance, and Mandy Brocklehurst said that her roommate was not in bed the next morning.

Harry thus far had avoided suspicion. Most knew that Lisa and her fellow Ravenclaws were friends of Harry, and didn't believe that he'd attack one of the few people that was willing to converse with him. Harry was also seen talking and laughing with Ginny Weasley and Lisa the previous night, and nothing had seemed amiss. Ron Weasley didn't have any wild rumors for the students to feast on, because both Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter had been apparently sleeping soundly the night of the attack, and both appeared as mystified as all were about what had happened to Lisa.

Harry personally thought that Hermione and Ginny were doing a great job concealing what they knew. He hoped his acting was just as good.

Harry was currently lying on his stomach in his four poster bed, having a long overdue conversation with Tom.

...A Parselmouth? That's interesting.

Sure is. Daphne can't find any link to Salazar Slytherin's bloodline in my family.

Indeed, that's how one would inherit that gift. Salazar was the original, and there have only been a handful throughout history...until you, of course. Seems like a lot of things happen to you.

You're telling me. At least the whole school doesn't suspect me anymore. I'm not sure why people always jump on me.

Well, it seems that Slytherin has a negative reputation in your time, far more so than when I went there. You are a powerful wizard for your age, Harry, and people fear that. It seems that they made the foolish assumption that all heroes come from Gryffindor, and thus were blind-sided utterly when you were Sorted into the House of Serpents. One would believe that Grindelwald would have taught them differently...

That's true. He was a Gryffindor, right?

Yes, a roommate of Albus Dumbledore. They were never friends, or anything like that, but Grindelwald didn't have the bloodlines or the cunning to be in Slytherin. He was a brave man, if perhaps a man driven mad by his power.

How so?

Grindelwald, as you probably know, was a member of the Nazi Party in Germany. He was Hitler's wizarding advisor, and commanded the wizarding elements of the Nazi armies. I'm not sure how much you know, but their Confundus Charms were essential to the success of Blitzkrieg, so called 'Lightning War.' It involved the rapid movement of armies and aircraft to surprise and outflank the enemy.

How do you know all of this?

Ah. I was a Slytherin, Harry, and an ambitious one at that. While many consider Muggle history beneath them, along with Muggle society, I am of the opinion that we can still learn from their mistakes. They tend to repeat them throughout history. Hitler was a madman, a butcher of innocents, but his success is rooted in his charisma, his drive. He compelled a nation of desperate Germans to create the Third Reich. And to think, he wasn't even a wizard. While I don't endorse wholesale slaughter, he is still a man to be admired simply for his leadership.

I see your point there. History's dictators are often men of great leadership ability.

I'm glad to see I'm talking to someone with knowledge of the subject. Yes, from Napoleon of France, to Joseph Stalin of Russia, to the Kings of Europe and Emperors of Japan, many great leaders can be found. While their methods were not always the best, I daresay some of our weaker Ministers of Magic might learn something from them. From what you've told me, this Cornelius Fudge is pitifully weak.

Well, to a degree. I don't know that much Muggle History, but I know that Stalin was a paranoid maniac and many of the Kings of Europe were weaker than our current Minister...not that it's a high standard.

Yes, Harry. So has anything else happened involving the Chamber of Secrets?

Well, I told you about Lisa, and Mrs. Norris. The students are not yet fearing for their lives or beginning to panic, but a few more attacks and that may begin.

That, or their parents will demand that action can be taken. Then again, one cannot blame parents for their concern for their children.

The school is trying to cover it up. As bad as that sounds, it really seems like their only real choice. The parents of Muggleborns, who don't understand how dangerous the Magical World is, will likely begin to pull them out of school. I like Ginny, but I couldn't survive without Hermione. I doubt she'd benefit much from never seeing me again either.

You seem rather close.

There's nothing going on, but she's very important to me. She was the first person to befriend me. Ginny's nice, and there's something there, but Hermione was the first to see through the whole 'Slytherin Boy-Who-Lived' thing.

Even though you had to get hit by a troll's club before she'd talk to you? Harry got the idea that he'd be smirking if he could.

Well, there was that. But she was Muggleborn, trying to fit in. Is associating with a person who is universally feared and hated a way to do that?

Perhaps she shouldn't have let the rumors and falsities she heard bother her...though perhaps you are right. I cannot say I had any true friends, but there were benefits. I became the most knowledgeable student in my year.

I suppose. I'm not sure I would have been able to do that. Did growing up in an orphanage help you learn to operate on your own?

Yes, Harry. You are sharp as always. I had few companions where I grew up. The children were constantly changing anyway, as some were adopted.

I must admit I'm surprised that you weren't taken in.

I wouldn't have gone to a Muggle family even if they had been taken with me. A Muggle abandoned my mother, and I had known mistreatment from them at an early age. Hogwarts was the best thing to ever happen to me. A chance to be a standout, to have power that others didn't. You can't possibly understand how thrilled I was when Albus Dumbledore himself arrived to tell me what I was.

Dumbledore came himself?

Indeed, it appears my letters were being intercepted and destroyed by an employee who ironically thought he was acting in my best interests. He believed that they were a practical joke.

I can see why he might. So when by the time you were created, you had no one there for you?

No, I did not. My Head of House, Horace Slughorn, viewed me as his prize student, but the man was egotistical and no father-figure. Books were my constant companion. I must have read through two-thirds of the Hogwarts Library. Along the way, I found the way to create this diary. I'm afraid I cannot tell you how, however.

I understand. Your creator must have been very proud, and wished to create something unique. I work hard to improve my magic, but I'm limited until my magic returns. My guardian also doesn't wish to turn me into a soldier at age twelve. I love her dearly, and she means everything to me, but based on the events of the previous year, I think that my childhood may have to 'take a back seat' to my training, to use a Muggle expression.

I see. I must say I don't agree with Daphne on this note. One always need to be prepared for the worst.

Victory does not bring rest. That should have been the motto of any Quidditch team captained by the eighth-troll 'Eighth Year' Marcus Flint. Whoever replaced Flint, one thing was for certain: they couldn't be any worse.

Flint's enthusiasm after winning the biggest game of the year lasted until the next practice, which was possibly the most awful two hours of Harry's life...including the Philosopher's Stone.

The practice took place on a Saturday, November 11th. As was typical for that time of year in Scotland, the weather was dreadful. It was cold, raining, and windy. Harry's hands were freezing cold from exposure, and he would need a long, hot shower to regain the feeling in his toes. As it was, his hair was soaked and plastered to his skull, as were his Quidditch robes. Even Hermione and Ginny didn't dare brave this practice, and Hermione was helping Ginny with a Transfiguration exercise in the library.

The Chasers were just dreadful, Flint included. Pucey's aim was horrendous, and he missed the goals four times, hitting Warrington in the head twice. Flint's passes were way off line, and it wasn't just because of the rain. Montague got Flint ranting at him for missing some of his terrible passes.

Warrington managed to block two goals with his skull, but missed each other goal. Flint hurled one straight at him that had him flying out of the way. For seeking to preserve his physical being, he got a scathing critique from a furious Flint that seemed to involve more insults to his ancestors than actual Quidditch terms.

The Beaters hit Flint twice...the problem was, they'd been aiming for Harry. As easily the smallest and quickest player on the field, Flint decided that Harry was to be the moving target for the Bludgers. Fortunately, the worst injury he'd suffered was a broken wrist. As if to make things worse, Pucey, who was lazily flying by, observing the action, was knocked unconscious when Bole's bat slipped out of his hand.

Harry fared no better. In the terrible conditions, even with a Water-Repelling Charm he'd picked up from Hermione, he simply could not see the Snitch. His sight was blurred by the torrential rains, and his soaking wet uniform actually slowed him a noticeable amount. The bone-chilling wind was rapidly turning him into a flying icicle. He'd risk a Drying Charm if he wasn't certain that Flint would bite his head off for a 'lack of stamina.'

And so it was that freezing cold and absolutely drenched, Harry headed in the Slytherin Locker room, his ears ringing from when Flint had gone off at his team. As if things couldn't get worse, the showers had been hexed to emit only freezing water. A few Drying and Warming Charms got rid of his chills, but he still felt awful. Still, he headed off to the library through the darkened corridors of the school. Most of the students were in their dormitories or socializing in the Great Hall on this dreadful Saturday.

He made his way upstairs, heading through the second floor, when he saw something rather odd.

Dean Thomas and Ron Weasley, emerging from a bathroom. Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. A *girl's* bathroom.

They froze as they spotted him standing there. Harry gave a maddening smirk, perfectly fit for annoying the hell out of Gryffindors. It was a Slytherin trademark. "What are you two doing on this fine day? Peeking into a girl's bathroom? Really, Weasley, Thomas, I thought you had more class than that?" he drawled lazily. The look on Ron's face was priceless.

"What the bloody hell are you doing here, Potter?" Thomas snapped. Harry shrugged. "Going to the library to study with my friends. Am I allowed to ask the same question?"

"You already did," Ron snapped. "My sister wouldn't happen to be in the library, would she?"

Harry smirked. So that was what this was about. "Oh yes," he said in a dreamy voice. "The beautiful, no...*gorgeous* Ginny Weasley is patiently awaiting the return of her heroic Dark *lover*, Harry Potter." Weasley gagged and turned green, while Thomas figured out what

Harry was doing and collapsed against the wall, laughing hard. Harry's smirk thinned a little; he hadn't intended to amuse either of the Gryffindors.

Ron's face had gone from green with disgust to purple with rage. "*Don't you touch her, Potter!*" he snarled.

Harry smiled, sensing opportunity. "I already have." When Ron's eyes bugged out, he added. "Hugging her kind of makes that necessary, does it not? I suppose you might be able to figure out a way to embrace a person without making physical contact, but..."

Dean snorted, but Ron's eyes glittered darkly. If he held his wand any tighter it would snap in half. Harry was ready to drop into a fighting stance if that was what came of this. "*You know what I mean, Potter,*" he hissed darkly.

Harry met his glare with his own. "I would *never* do *anything* without her permission, Weasley," he said softly. Assuming his usual drawl, he added, "Perhaps *you* should stop giggling *my* sister." Harry had indeed noticed Ron's eyes on Hermione quite often. He was convinced that Weasley had a crush on his best friend. Luckily for him, however, he knew that hell would freeze over before Hermione reciprocated it.

Ron turned red, confirming what Harry already knew. "What sister?" he asked in the most innocent-sounding voice he could muster. The problem was, Weasley wasn't nearly as good as Ginny at looking innocent. Dean was looking sideways at him now, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"You know who I'm talking about, Ron. You haven't been able to keep your eyes off Hermione. And yet you've done a phenomenal job ensuring that she despises you every waking moment of the day," Harry replied.

Dean snorted. "You fancy *Granger?*" he asked, snickering.

"Shut up, Dean," Ron snapped, turning a brighter red.

Harry was enjoying this, but wouldn't let his original goal slip by this easily. "So, back to what we were discussing, what exactly *were* you doing in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom?"

"None of your business, Potter," Ron snapped. "Come on Dean."

The two Gryffindors walked past Harry. As they went down the darkened hallway, he heard Dean ask again. "You actually fancy Granger?"

Ron yelled something at him, and Harry smirked in triumph.

Remembering his earlier destination, Harry hurried down the corridor to the steps leading to the third floor, then took the staircase near the library, and entered it. Students were scattered throughout, textbooks in front of them, speaking in hushed tones on scratching away at pieces of parchment. Madam Pince was replacing books on shelves (Harry had no idea why she couldn't do it with magic), eyeing the assembled students, ready to throw them out the instant that they talked too loudly for her highly sensitive ears.

Hermione and Ginny were the northeast corner of the library, just outside the entrance to the Restricted Section. Hermione standing next to Ginny, helping her work on a wand movement for something. It actually appeared to be the Levitation Charm, if the 'swish and flick' movement was any indication.

Overall, Ginny's marks this year had been superb. Harry and Hermione were more than happy to help her out with useful information or advice, or physical demonstrations as Hermione was doing at the moment. Hermione would even proofread her essays. The result was that she was on top of her class by a wide margin. Molly Weasley's last letter had been absolutely gushing with praise for Ginny and thanks for Harry and Hermione.

Their training had continued, but it was more or less just Harry trying to bring Hermione up to his level. Ginny wasn't happy about it, but from what he'd heard about Mrs. Weasley, he didn't want to risk her wrath. Harry did point Ginny in the direction of the right books, he just couldn't actually practice the spells with her.

Hermione was making steady progress. While the Muggleborn witch took longer to master most spells, Harry was starting to get the idea that he had exceptional magical power for his age. Hermione had mastered the Striking Curse, Blinding Hex, Burning Hex, Shield Charm, Stunning Spell, Disarming Spell, Blasting Hex, and Cutting Curse, along with a plethora of miscellaneous spells ranging from Drying Charms to the Boiling Curse. The later would be very useful if Harry had to fight underwater. Other than that, if used with minimum power, it was as good as a Warming Charm.

Hermione stepped behind the redhead and grasped her wrist, demonstrating the proper wrist movement. Ginny beamed as the pile of textbooks in front of her began floating. Hermione began talking very fast, based upon the movement of her lips, but Harry heard no sound. He then realized that his clever best friend must have cast Silencing Charms around the perimeter of 'their' study corner.

He walked closer, inside the charms.

"...that's it, Ginny. Now, is there anything else you needed help with...Hi Harry!" Hermione called excitedly.

Ginny turned around, a faint blush appearing on her cheeks. She looked him up and down, and grimaced. "You look a mess."

"Thanks Ginny," Harry said sarcastically, plopping down tiredly on his chair.

"How was practice?" Hermione asked. Her smile faded as she saw Harry's grimace. "That bad, huh?"

"That bad and worse," Harry replied, closing his eyes. "The whole team was just awful, including me. Flint really chewed us out, and I couldn't feel my toes until about four seconds ago." The two girls gave him a sympathetic look.

"Well, I'm glad Flint is going to be gone next year," Ginny said, then became nervous. "...I was kind of hoping to try out, Chaser, probably." Harry smiled to encourage her.

“Well, I don’t think they’ll let Flint stay for a ninth year, no matter how bad his grades are. Bole and Derrick are graduating too. You’ll have some competition, though...”

Ginny’s looked glum. “Well, the best you can do is try, right Harry?” Hermione said hopefully. As many games and practices as she attended, Hermione really didn’t know *anything* about Quidditch outside the actual rules.

“I suppose...I’ve never seen you fly before. How much flying have you done?” Harry asked.

Ginny’s frown turned into a mischievous grin. “Actually, I’ve been breaking into the broomshed since I was six years old to ‘borrow’ my brothers’ brooms. I’m actually...pretty good...” she said, turning bright red. Harry rolled his eyes.

“I’m sure you are, Ginny. I wouldn’t mind having someone else to suffer through Quidditch practices with...though I might be distracted by your looks...”

“*HARRY!*” Ginny and Hermione cried simultaneously.

Maybe Flint wasn’t insane to have us flying in the rain, Harry thought, as he soared high over the Quidditch pitch, rain falling heavily and lightning flashing around them. There was no such thing as a rain delay in Quidditch. If it there were hail stones this size of centaurs, they’d play. If it started raining fire, they’d play.

And if it was pouring with rain, lightning strikes hitting dangerously close to the players, freezing cold, and the wind blowing at seventy-five kilometers an hour...

They’d play.

A Ravenclaw Beater whacked a Bludger towards him, and Harry evaded it, heading back towards the other end of the field. Bole met the blue and bronze-clad player in mid-air, and hammered the Bludgers away from him, until he hit it into the back of James Bradley, nearly unseating him as he howled in pain. Flint took advantage of

the Beater's injury to get the ball to Pucey, who hurled it through the hoop past the Bryan Lynch, the Ravenclaw keeper, to make it five straight Slytherin goals to open the game.

Well, at least one good thing had come out of all the pain and suffering: the team was a sharp as they'd ever been. For the second consecutive year, the Ravenclaws were completely outmatched.

Or at least they were...until a well-aimed Bludger connected with Adiran Pucey's head. The boy was knocked off his broom, and only Harry's hasty Levitation Charm saved him from serious injury. This time, Hooch thanked Harry for using magic during a game as the unconscious boy was loaded onto a stretcher and rushed to the Hospital Wing with a cracked skull.

In Quidditch, there are no substitutions. There are reserves, but because so few injuries ever knock a player out for the entire game, few teams had them. Slytherin had none. Down to two Chasers, the Slytherins were at a major disadvantage.

The Ravenclaws took advantage, giving Warrington whiplash as they scored nine unanswered goals, interrupted by two timeouts and accompanying tirades by Flint.

His message got through during the third timeout, and he and Montague managed to force four goals through while Warrington showed previously unseen skill and blocked six straight shots. Until Roger Davies hurled one through the center hoop and gave Ravenclaw the lead.

Harry circled the Pitch one more time, keeping an eye on the Ravenclaw Chaser, a pretty Asian girl named Cho Chang. Harry didn't often tail other Seekers, but with the luck he was having today, he couldn't afford to let Chang get a free pass at the Snitch.

Harry did a pair of barrel-rolls that would probably have Hermione screaming at him for unnecessary risk-taking, then flew around in a loop, flashing by Cho, who was entertaining herself in a similar fashion. The Snitch was nowhere to be found in the mess, and Harry needed to do something to distract himself from the cold.

Cho flew by lazily. "Having fun, Potter?" she called over.

"Better than doing nothing!" Harry yelled through the storm. He'd already tried to take her out with twice, but she'd apparently been paying attention to what he'd done to Weasley and McGlaggen, and kept her distance, ascertaining that Harry didn't actually have a line on the Snitch.

Cho flew away, searching elsewhere. Harry glanced down to see that the score was now 170-160 in favor of Ravenclaw. Harry thought Flint and Montague were doing a remarkable job in the absence of Pucey.

Finally, with his hands practically frozen to his Nimbus, Harry spotted his elusive prey. The golden glimmer near the Slytherin goalposts sent a surge of adrenaline into his system, and he was off like a rocket. Cho was left in his vapor trail as he wrapped numb fingers around the struggling golden ball, pumping his fist in weary triumph.

The Slytherins didn't bother to celebrate on the field, making for the locker room, and warmth, as soon as they were sure the game was over. Harry changed and took a long shower in the un-hexed stalls, trying to drown himself in scalding water to stop his shivering.

When he emerged a half-hour later, he received hugs from his two best friends, and the expected tirade from Hermione about his 'outrageously unnecessary risk-taking and daredevil stunts.' Harry was grateful that she cared so much, but didn't object when Ginny Silenced her.

The freezing rain and miserable conditions gave way to snow, and the trio was fortunate to get in one last visit to Hagrid before Christmas break before the snow came. It was two feet deep in places, and Flint actually had to cancel two practices because *he* was too cold.

Christmas was fast approaching, and Ginny wasn't happy. Apparently, her parents' financial situation made it almost necessary for them to leave their children at Hogwarts. They also wanted to visit Bill Weasley in Egypt (They'd visited Ginny's Dragon-handler brother, Charlie, in Romania the previous year). Harry was going home to

Dressler Manor to spend the holidays with Daphne and the Tonks' (apparently, Andromeda and Daphne were constantly exchanging owls, their friendship renewed)

The woman may have been nine years Daphne's senior, but the two had met at the Ministry the during Daphne's Auror training. Harry was rapidly growing to think of the younger Tonks as his older sister (after all, she could pass for a sister if she wanted to). Hermione was once more expected to visit relatives, none of whom were her age, along with her parents. Harry wasn't sure, but he thought that Hermione's parents were trying to get as much of their daughter in 'their' world as they could. Hermione resented this to a degree, though she loved her parents dearly.

What was of interest was Ron Weasley's mysterious behavior. Hermione had been keeping an eye on him ever since Harry found him walking out of the girl's bathroom on the second floor. He's been disappearing for long periods of time. There was also the major fiasco in potions about a month earlier, the day after the attack on Lisa. Crabbe and Goyle's potion had exploded, dousing the entire class in Swelling Solution (Snape was bitterly re-teaching it), except for Harry and Hermione who dove for cover before the explosion. Harry wasn't sure, but he thought he'd seen a sparking object hurled from the direction of Ron Weasley. Dean Thomas had also vanished for a moment. Hermione thought he might be attempting to brew Polyjuice Potion, though the inept Gryffindor was more likely to poison himself than actually succeed.

Ginny and Harry were walking alone through the First Floor near the Hospital Wing, after saying a quick hello to the un-hearing Lisa Turpin. Hermione had stayed behind, feeling guilty that the Ravenclaw had been Petrified because she'd been coming to visit her fellow Muggleborn. The entire school now knew about the entire affair, mostly because a sick student had ripped the curtains aside searching for an unused bed, revealing the Petrified girl. He'd reported her dead, but older students had recognized the symptoms and identified that she was merely Petrified.

As they walked along the corridor, they were met by a rather strange sight: Crabbe and Goyle, not only alone, but also chasing a pair of

floating cupcakes. Harry heard Ginny give an un-ladylike snort of laughter as the two clueless-looking goons disappeared upstairs. Nearby, Harry spotted Penelope Clearwater, a Ravenclaw prefect and Percy Weasley's girlfriend (Ginny had had the unfortunate experience of walking in on them snogging in a deserted classroom). The tall girl with curly blond hair was snickering at the antics of Malfoy's goons. Harry also noticed her wand was drawn.

Harry and Ginny went into the Great Hall, which was bustling with student activity on this frigid day. Some students were doing homework, others were chatting idly, watched over by the imposing presence of Severus Snape, whose ears appeared to be more sensitive than Madam Pince's ears when it came to an 'unacceptable' noise level. The two walked over to where Michael Crawford, Terry Boot, Padma Patil, and Mandy Brocklehurst were studying quietly.

"Hello Harry, Ginny," Michael said, glancing up from a book on hags. Harry had pursued his earlier suspicion, and found that Michael was in fact *very* distantly related to Daphne O'Connor.

"Hello Michael," Ginny said, plopping down next to Mandy. Harry took a seat next to Padma Patil. He liked the twins a lot more than her gossipy, superficial sister, Parvati. Hermione shared this view.

"Where's Hermione?" Terry asked, looking around. "You guys are never away from each other."

"We are occasionally," Harry pointed out. "But that's not the point...Hermione's visiting her *friend*," Harry said, putting emphasis on the last word to show that she was with Lisa. Harry and Ginny had told Terry and Mandy about what had happened (without mentioning the Chamber of Secrets).

"Oh, I see," Mandy said. "So what have you two been up to?"

"Not much," Harry said, running a hand through his hair absently. "Flint's stopped trying to kill us on regular basis."

"He took out his frustrations on our Quidditch team then?" Padma asked. "That's two years in a row they've manhandled us."

"I suppose we did," Harry admitted. "But I doubt you want to talk about Quidditch."

"You're damn right," Terry said excitedly. "Tell us what you know about the Chamber of Secrets. I heard you discussing it with Granger, and you know more than *Hogwarts: A History* does."

Harry sighed. He then proceeded to explain the entire legend from his memory of Daphne's letter. The Ravenclaws were a very receptive audience. Mindful of Dumbledore's warning, he neglected to mention the events of fifty years prior. Ginny gave him a questioning glance, but then realized the reason for his omission.

"Wow, that's something," Mandy said. "Well, Lisa's Muggleborn, and Filch is a Squib...do you have any idea who the Heir of Slytherin might be? Probably someone in your House, no?"

"Haven't you heard?" Harry said with mock-incredulity. "I or Draco Malfoy *has* to be the Heir of Slytherin. After all, I'm a Dark Wizard who *eats* First Years for dinner in *cannibalistic* Dark rituals that increase my power in between *seducing* the innocent, love-struck Ginny Weasley (while she knew he was making fun of Ron's nonsensical rumors, Ginny still turned bright red), and sets the Monster of Slytherin on Muggleborns in my spare time. Oh, and I'm a Parselmouth, which should get me thrown into Azkaban because it's conclusive *proof* that I'm a Dark Wizard...Draco's just comes from a Dark family and is the son of a Death Eater, and he's been passed the key to the Heir of Slytherin from his father, Lucius." Harry finished with a deep breath, and would have patted himself on the back for keeping a straight face if people wouldn't think he was a narcissistic egomaniac.

The Ravenclaws stared at him for a moment, processing what they'd just heard. Then Terry snorted and started howling with laughter, followed by the rest of the Ravenclaw table. Snape angrily walked over and ordered them out. They packed up their books and headed for their respective dormitories, though not before Terry and Micheal both smacked him on the back in congratulations. Harry apologized to Ginny after that, and the small redhead kicked him in the shin.

They headed downstairs towards the dungeons. As they walked along the corridor, they saw another strange sight: Crabbe and Goyle determinedly rattling off passwords...to a blank stone wall.

As dull as Crabbe and Goyle were, they would *not* forget where the Common Room was, and the only thing they seemed to be *capable* of remembering was the week's passwords.

"Ginny," he whispered, ducking out of sight. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"...what?...OH!...no, no, they couldn't have been *that* stupid," Ginny mumbled to herself. Harry's face was set and determined.

"I'll bet you ten galleons that that's your brother and Dean Thomas under Polyjuice Potion...I don't know how they brewed it, but nonetheless. Care to have a little talk with your darling brother?"

Ginny's eye's which had been wide with disbelief, were narrowed in anger. Harry wasn't surprised; she had to feel betrayed that Ron wouldn't trust her to know her best friend and another boy in her House wasn't the Heir. And that he'd taken such steps to violate their collective privacy and potentially get himself expelled. "Let's go," she hissed.

Harry and Ginny strode towards the two imposters, wide grins on their faces. A flick of his wrist and his wand was in his hand. "Evening Weasley...you seem to have forgotten where your Common Room is...and what uniforms you where...and that brewing Polyjuice Potion is illegal...and that your sister would skin you alive for trying this...and that your mum would incinerate whatever was left of you...and that Crabbe and Goyle are slightly more intelligent than the average troll." With every word Harry said, Dean and Ron's eyes widened in terror. Harry now had a malicious grin on his face. "I think we need to have a little talk. *Stupefy!*" Ginny and Harry cried simultaneously.

They dragged the unconscious Gryffindors into a side classroom, and dumped them in the middle. Finally, the Polyjuice wore off, and the two groaned as they awakened. Ron looked around mumbling something, then froze when he saw Harry and Ginny standing there,

wands drawn. “*YOU!*” he yelled, then registered the presence of his sister.

“Evening, Ronald,” Ginny said coldly. “Now why don’t you give us one reason why we shouldn’t report you to Professor Snape for brewing an illegal potion and raiding his storeroom. I daresay he’ll be rather angry with you. And I doubt Dad will be very pleased when Dumbledore snaps Granddad’s wand.”

What Ginny was saying appeared to be sinking in, and Ron paled dramatically. Dean seemed to be hiding in the shadows, trying to avoid notice. Harry wasn’t planning to allow him to succeed. “And you, Thomas. Your father would be quite disappointed...Wesley Jugson’s own son, *expelled* for illegally impersonating a student.” Dean’s mouth dropped open.

“What?”

“*You don’t know?*” Harry asked curiously.

Dean shook his head nervously. “*I* do, but no one else does...except *you* apparently...and now everyone is this room...”

“Yes, Daphne put your biological *uncle* into Azkaban,” Harry replied coldly. “Who knows, you might *join* him for a time?”

Dean swallowed. “My mother had *nothing* to do with that *filth!*” Ron and Ginny were staring back and forth between the two boys, trying to understand the cryptic conversation they were having.

“I’m sure,” Harry replied, a trace of sympathy leaking into his voice. “Addison did *kill* Wesley, of course. Then Emma Jugson re-married a Muggle while pregnant with Wesley’s son, Clarence Thomas, raising you as Dean Thomas.” Dean nodded gravely. “I won’t tell anyone else,” he replied honestly. “Unless you give me reason to...”

Ron snarled, not at Dean, but at Harry. “*Bastard*...Ginny, how can you adore this...piece of dragon dung?”

Ginny’s glare intensified, red appearing on her cheeks not from embarrassment, but from anger. “Because I choose to,” she hissed.

"Back to our conversation, Weasley, you get your wish. I'll tell you straight out that neither me nor Malfoy is the Heir of Slytherin...it makes much more sense for it to be older student, does it not?" Ron just glared at him. "Who was the third person, I know you couldn't have brewed Polyjuice on your own."

Dean sighed. "It was Penelope Clearwater." Ron looked at him like he was a traitor.

"Dean!"

"What, Ron? It's not like they wouldn't have found out anyway!" he yelled at his friend.

"We'll deal with her later...Ginny, we shouldn't let this excellent blackmail opportunity go by, should we?" Harry asked, keeping his eyes on Weasel. Ginny grinned evilly, her Slytherin side showing through her innocent exterior. Ron looked absolutely horrified.

"Seen this before, Weasel?" Harry taunted.

"She always used to get us in trouble...then blackmail us when it was actually our fault," Ron admitted. "I never thought it would make her a slimy Slytherin."

"For that, Ron," Ginny cut him off, "if you ever do something to cause Hermione to slap you, I'll rat you out to Snape." Ron did a good imitation of a goldfish.

"You...bloody...traitor!" he got out. Ginny flinched. Harry's eyes darkened dangerously.

"*Say that again, Weasel, and you'll wish you'd never been born,*" Harry hissed darkly, his eyes flashing red. Ginny flinched, and Ron's eyes widened in terror.

"Come on, Harry, let's leave these two idiots," Ginny said, grabbing him by the sleeve of his robes. When they were outside, Harry rounded on her.

“What was that about?” he demanded. Ginny flinched again; she really didn’t like seeing Harry, who was so laid back at times, this angry.

“You were about to curse him...I thought it best I get you out of there...” she replied nervously. Harry’s glare softened into an expression of shame and gratitude.

“Thanks Ginny,” he said. “I’m sorry about what that git said-“

“It’s not your fault,” Ginny pointed out. “I’ll be okay,” she said with as much confidence as she could muster.

Harry wasn’t sure he believed her, though.

Chapter 11: Family Ties

As much as Ron Weasley had been embarrassed by the Polyjuice incident, he soon had a new weapon to use against the 'evil Slytherin corruption' of Harry Potter. It was confirmed that Ginny Weasley would be alone...well, with her family. For the holidays.

As she was miserable.

While Fred and George continued to try to be civil to their sister, it was obvious they weren't fond of what she had become (Ron had given them a heavily-edited version of the incident, omitting the actual reason that Harry now held a four-thousand pound weight over his head). Percy wasn't any better, preferring to just ignore his sister at all times, avoiding her in the hallways, and not responding if she said hello to him. He'd often moved upstairs or to the library when Hermione would invite Harry and Ginny into the Gryffindor Common Room. Neville Longbottom had tried to engage them in conversation multiple times, but seemed fearful of Ron's wrath. Harry realized that the boy probably had few friends, and didn't want to alienate any of them.

Ron was less blatant than usual, but he still reminded Ginny that she'd be alone with them for the two-week holiday break (it was longer this year, for some reason). It was strange that a girl wouldn't want to be with her family, but the only family that Ginny wanted to see was her parents. He'd found her crying several times in remote locales of the castle, depressed that she'd be alone, and also very guilty that she didn't *want* to be with her brothers. It took a cold-blooded threat from Harry to stop Ron constantly reminding her.

After receiving Ginny's permission, Harry had even sent a letter off to Daphne, asking if she might talk to Molly Weasley and see if she might allow her daughter to spend the holidays at Dressler Manor. Ginny wasn't optimistic, though, she expected that her mother would be shocked that she was even asking and would baby her, believing that this was part of her already-shattered crush. Harry's tactic making Ginny constantly aware of her infatuation, while not giving in whenever her crush became apparent, seemed to have worked.

Ginny no longer felt the least bit embarrassed or awkward around Harry.

She'd also begun to pick up some friends of her own. She was especially spending a lot of time around Luna Lovegood.

Luna had to be the strangest individual that Harry had ever met. According to Ginny, her childhood friend had been very quiet and shy, and had been extremely close to her mother, Amanda, who was employed by the Spell Research and Development, but preferred to do the vast majority of her work at home. When asked, Daphne couldn't recall ever meeting her.

Nor could Andromeda, who visited the Department often in her job as Head Secretary of the Accidental Spell Damage Department at St. Mungos. Andromeda, while under a Secrecy Charm, couldn't disclose the names of patients, but could rattle off dozens of strange cases that crossed her desk. Many of them involved spells never seen before, hence the visits to the 'Think-tank,' as it was known in the Ministry.

Regardless, the death of her mother had apparently changed her daughter a great deal. She could now spit out hundreds of facts about dozens of non-existent creatures, and read the *Quibbler* like Muggles read Scripture. What was deceiving about her was that in between the spurts of nonsense, Luna was easily as observant as Harry or Nott, and had a talent for recognizing both the obvious and the subtle. One simply had to learn to filter out the details of Snorkack migration and learn to nod agreeably, and you'd hear some of the most profound things that a girl wearing a butter-beer cork necklace had ever said. Some didn't make much sense, of course.

It could be a test of his patience at times, but Ginny seemed to find it amusing, and could actually have four or more lines of intelligence conversation before Luna said something odd.

Still, like with Tonks, a conversation was never boring when the girl's dreamy voice entered it.

Ginny's other new friend was Anne Grunitch, the same girl that she had met the night of the Sorting. Anne was, obviously, very different

than Ginny. She seemed kind to those she liked, while cold and unhelpful to those she didn't. Harry didn't know her level of magical power, but she seemed bright enough. She was also ambitious, and competed with Ginny for the highest marks in the year, *without* the aid of the two most diligent and studious pupils in Second Year. Still, Harry wasn't sure if it was natural ability or simply determination to be better than everyone else that drove the girl. He had a feeling she was not a person he'd like to get on the bad side of.

Harry and Hermione had finally hit a rough patch in Second Year, with the arrival of some rather difficult Transfiguration and Potions. The former required great precision, while the latter required more than just knowledge of the textbook. Harry found that he was developing a feel for the subject, and was able to make accurate judgments and guesses to improve the potency of their potions.

At this moment however, Harry was in search of the third 'conspirator' in Ron Weasley's idiotic plan to infiltrate the Slytherin Dormitories. From what he'd gathered from Terry and Mandy, Penelope Clearwater, a Muggleborn Ravenclaw Prefect known for her passion to succeed, was not a likely candidate to brew an illegal potion, and even less of a candidate to trust Ron Weasley with the execution of the plan. Nonetheless, when confronted, Dean had implicated her.

He left Hermione in the library, where she was attempting two equally difficult research projects: find new spells that they could learn before their magic matured, and figure out what could allow someone to Petrify a living being without the aid of the ridiculously long and strenuous ritual that was normally required.

His destination was the last place he'd seen Ron and Dean that seemed suspicious: Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. As he approached, he heard voices, and knew he'd hit pay dirt.

"...You told *Potter!*" a slightly hysterical female voice cried out. "Are you *insane?*"

"...it wasn't *my* fault!" a petulant-sounding male voice replied.

"...he would have found out anyway," a defeated sounding voice replied. Harry had already identified the latter two as Ron Weasley

and Dean Thomas. The first was, no doubt, the aforementioned Penelope Clearwater.

“...SO *WHAT!*” Penelope cried. “It’s not *your* career and magical education that’s hanging in the balance...and Percy...”

“...what made you want to be with that stuck-up prat anyway!...So he dumps you, *big deal!*”

SLAP

Harry took this as his opportunity to make an entrance. He roughly shoved the door open, putting on a sly grin as he did so, and surveyed the scene in front of him.

Myrtle had apparently been rather unhappy recently, as the bathroom was flooded, and all four people in the room were now standing in about an inch of water. Harry had heard about the bathroom from Hermione, but this was the first time he’d been inside it. The floors and walls were cracked and chipped, and it looked like most of the toilets and sinks were out of order. He also noticed a boiling cauldron atop one of the toilets in a stall off to his right.

As to the people in the room, Harry gave them each a look-over. Dean was slumped against one of the sinks, his body language defeated. He had a dejected look in his eyes, and a kind of forlorn resignation that they’d been beaten. Ron was standing in one of the deeper pools of water, next to the mirrors. His right hand was currently touching his cheek, which was bright red from where Penelope had slapped him for his tactlessness.

The aforementioned Ravenclaw Prefect looked terrible, her face pale and drawn, her eyes red-rimmed from crying, and her hair disheveled. She looked like she hadn’t slept in days. *She probably hasn’t if what I overheard was true. This could get her expelled, and as a Muggleborn, she’d lose her only chance at advancement and a magical education. It’s really a fine line they walk, and Dean ratted her out. No wonder she’s mad. I doubt this is about Percy at all...*

As he entered, all three froze in horror and turned to look at him, eyes widening. Penelope paled as Harry’s emerald eyes drifted to the

boiling cauldron. "My, my...what do we have here?" he asked, already knowing exactly what was going on. Ron spluttered, and Dean coughed.

Penelope recovered her composure remarkably fast, and crossed her arms across her chest. "Fine. You've got me Potter...what do you want?" she asked sharply.

"Leverage. It's always useful to have it over a *Prefect*..." Harry said, his Slytherin tendencies showing themselves. Indeed, being able to have a Prefect on his side, unwilling or not, might get him out of a number of sticky situations that he might find himself in.

"...Why you slimy..."

"Quiet, Ron," Penelope snapped, turning hard blue eyes back to Harry. "You've got it. You no doubt just overheard our whole conversation. I know how you Slytherins operate. You keep your mouth shut, and I do something for you in the future...Fine. It's not like I have any choice."

Harry nodded. "Why did you do it? I really thought you more intelligence than this..."

Penelope sighed, the hard look in her eyes clouding over with regret. "These two somehow convinced me that as a Muggleborn, it was in my best interests to help them solve the mystery of the Heir of Slytherin. I was stupid enough to believe them. That, and I don't want my relationship with Percy getting back to the twins...they'll make our lives hell."

Harry stared at her. "Let me get this straight...you *bought* that? And risked everything on the word of an idiot like Weasley?"

"Hey!" Ron yelled. Dean elbowed him in the ribs. A quick look from Harry shut him up.

"Well...?"

Penelope sighed again, running a hand through her tangled hair. "My family isn't that wealthy...I thought that we might get a reward-No,

actually, Ron *guaranteed* we'd get rewarded...I can't believe I bought that..."

"Neither can I," Harry admitted, his voice stiff and business-like, "but what's done is done. You understand your part, I understand mine." Penelope nodded sharply as she tried to maintain her composure.

"How can you just let him do that?" Ron demanded. "How can you just...just give up to that bloody Slytherin?"

She rounded on him. "Because he has the upper edge. Sometimes you have to concede defeat." Harry nodded, a small smirk breaking through his stoic, business-like expression.

"She's right...I recommend you get rid of that Polyjuice before I accidentally tell Snape he ought to check on the Second Floor Bathroom. Routine checkup, y'know?"

Penelope glared at him. "I'm sure, Potter. Not a word."

"I may be Slytherin, but I keep my promises. You help me out at some point in the future, and I don't tell Snape who was going through his personal store cupboards," Harry replied evenly, then spun on his heel and left the three to clean up their mess.

"Pass the marmalade, would you Harry?" Ginny asked. Harry handed it to her, and took in her physical state. She looked very tired and anxious, and would occasionally glance over at her brother, Ron, who was pointedly ignoring her.

It had taken Harry a while, but he'd finally figured out why Ginny was so nervous about staying with her brothers at Hogwarts. She certainly didn't fear for her safety, and Ron could be as big an arse and Percy as big a prat as he wanted, but Fred and George weren't going to abandon their little sister. But what Ginny was afraid of was that they wouldn't treat her like an equal, that they'd treat her like some poor little child who had had her good and innocent way corrupted by the Slytherin Demon known as Harry James Potter.

He couldn't blame her for being depressed.

"You know Ginevra, families are meant to be together. Sometimes healing can only be achieved once people have mutual understanding...like how Night-Eyed Bliggies eat the nargles out of each other's hair," Luna stated. Harry, Hermione, Ginny, Terry, Mandy, and Padma all blinked at that declaration. It was December 15th, and Christmas Break was drawing near, just three days away.

"...Okay, Luna. Thanks..." Ginny replied uncertainly.

"No problem Ginevra...heliopath got your tongue, Harold? You don't want to undergo the treatment for heliopath possession at the Ministry. They suck your brain out with a magical straw and replace it with a tank of vampire blood."

For some reason, the word 'possession' cause Harry to shudder. He blinked twice, both at Luna's nonsensical declaration and that strange feeling. Hermione was staring at Luna as though she could decipher the enigmatic girl's language by gazing into the depths of her soul.

Harry glanced up when he heard the chatter increase, and saw the morning post owls flying through the window. He was surprised to notice his own snowy owl flying down towards them. Hedwig landed right next to Harry and began helping herself to his bacon, while sticking out her leg. Harry pulled the ribbon off his familiar and scratched her behind both ears. "It's Daphne's reply," he said. Ginny sat up excitedly, and scooted over so that they could read it together.

Dearest Harry,

As we agreed upon, I'll be meeting you at King's Cross once you get off the Hogwarts Express. Tonks has managed to get time off so that she can come with Andromeda (She REALLY wants to see you...I'd be wary), so they'll both be staying with us.

As will Ginny. I flooed her mother, and while she was a bit averse to having her only daughter stay with a male friend (I'll not say boy friend as to spare her some embarrassment if she's reading this), she eventually agreed it would be best. She's rather disappointed with her boys, and I don't want to be Ronald when he gets home. Or Percy.

It seems like things are looking up. It's horrible what happened to Lisa, and I hope Dumbledore doesn't let his guard down because there hasn't been an attack in about a month. I've got some spells I've picked out that I'll have you read up on. We're going to do some work this summer, Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry or not. The Ministry won't be able to find out at any of our homes; the wards are too strong.

So, back to the point of this letter. If Ginny wants to come, just send Hedwig back with a reply, and I'll owl her mother. I have no doubt that Molly will send Ginny something exuding over-protectiveness and smothering love. I pity her, and tell her I'll let her make her own decisions during her stay at Dressler Manor.

Love,

Daphne

Ginny giggled as she read the letter, and Harry turned to her. "What?"

"Oh, it's nothing. It's just that Daphne knows Mum so well. Everything she predicted is almost *guaranteed* to happen. So I get to stay with you over break?" Ginny asked excitedly.

Harry nodded, smirking. "And Tonks. Never forget Tonks. And get ready for some merciless verbal torment." Ginny smiled.

"I think I can handle it...so, Hermione, are you going to be coming by?"

Hermione looked thoughtful. "I hope so, I just don't know how much my parents will push for me to stay with them. They really...I don't know, it's probably strange for me to be spending so much time away from them, considering how close we've been in the past..."

Harry nodded. "You ought to give them that, Hermione. We'll see plenty of you when you get back."

Hermione sighed. "I know...I just...last summer, I tried to socialize with some of the children in my neighborhood, but they're all Muggles and...well, Biology doesn't really compare well to Transfiguration..."

"That's got to be tough, pretending that you don't live in another world except for homework," Ginny said sympathetically.

"It is," Hermione said sadly.

Harry and Ginny were in the library, practicing the movement for a Shielding Spell. Hermione was feeling a bit under the weather and had gone to Madam Pomfrey for some potions and a lie-down. As he went around Ginny's back, taking her wrist and working her through the movements for the Shielding Spell, Ron approached, looking murderous and Ginny jumped back like she'd been scalded. Harry deftly stepped aside, so that he was slightly in front of the younger girl. "What do you want, Ron?"

Ron mouthed something, and Harry stared. Then he cancelled the Silencing Charms. "Sorry, what was that?"

"Why'd the bloody hell did you put Silencing Charms up in the library? Teaching my sister Dark Magic?" he demanded angrily.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Practicing her classwork, mostly, as well as mine and Hermione's. We were just working on the Shielding Charm."

"Yeah right," Ron muttered. Then he looked up brightly. "So, Ginny, I came here to ask if you'd like to stay with the rest of us in the Gryffindor Dormitories for the Christmas Break. There's so few Gryffindors, I doubt McGonagall would mind."

"...well, you see Ron..." she began nervously.

"She's staying with me at Dressler Manor," Harry finished for her. He then whispered a few Silencing Charms, to contain the inevitable explosion. Ginny looked absolutely terrified as Ron turned an interesting color of puce, his ears so red that Harry half-expected to see steam coming out of them. And he hadn't had a Pepper-Up Potion.

"WHAT? YOU'RE STAYING WITH HIM! HOW THE BLOODY HELL IS THAT POSSIBLE? DOES MUM EVEN KNOW?"

"Yes, Ron, she does," Ginny replied, tearing welling up in her eyes. Harry's ire rose.

"I'M GOING TO KILL YOU, YOU BLOODY, SODDING-"

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Hermione, wand drawn, say something from beyond the Silencing Charms. It turned out to be the incantation for the Stunning Spell, as a red jet of light hit the furious redhead in the back, and he slumped to the ground.

Hermione walked through the charms, a regretful look on her face. "I really wish I didn't have to do that."

Ginny took a deep breath, a few tears in her eyes. "I just wish he wouldn't be such a git...that he would grow up." She turned to look at them. "I just don't understand why he can't see how nice you are," she said sadly.

Hermione walked up to her and the younger girl into a hug. Harry meanwhile, levitated Ron's unconscious form to another part of the library, recast the Silencing Charms, and sat there, arms crossed, waiting for him to recover.

This was just getting out of hand. He needed to have a talk with Weasley, before he drove his sister into depression and Harry over the edge. And there wouldn't be much left of him to be scolded by his mother if the latter happened.

Ron stirred with a groan, blinking repeatedly. Harry kept his wand in hand in case things didn't go so well, but kept it pointed at the floor. He gave Ron a hard look, and the redhead glared at him. "What do you think you're doing, Stunning me like that? I've got some dirt on you now, Potter!"

Harry didn't blink, remaining stoic and composed. "First rule of blackmail, Weasley: make sure you actually *have* dirt in the first place. I didn't Stun you; Hermione did. And it was because you were a second away from doing something you'd very much regret." He said this with no anger, no resentment; no emotion at all. It was more intimidating, in a way.

Ron seemed to take this in. "What do you want, Potter?"

"We need to have a talk, Weasley. One that doesn't involve wand, fists, or threats," Harry said. There was an air of authority to his voice, a maturity beyond his years that was present in anything Daphne said.

"What do you mean?"

Harry paced around. "Get up, Weasley. I don't want to talk down to you. That undermines the whole exercise."

Ron got to his feet, his hand plunging into his robes. "No wands, Weasley," Harry said, dropping his own on the floor, and then rolling it towards the middle of the space with his toe. Ron reluctantly followed his lead.

"What's this about?" he said, taking a deep breath.

"It's about your sister, Ron. It's about how you've been treating her like, well...how you treat me. Which is hardly the way that one should behave around immediate family, am I not right?" Harry asked rhetorically.

"I guess...I guess I've been ignoring her a lot," Ron admitted.

Harry stopped pacing. "If she hadn't been friends with me, how long do you suppose it would have taken for you to get over what House she was Sorted in? Answer me honestly."

Ron looked thoughtful for perhaps the first time Harry had ever seen him. "I dunno. I was really mad...though it was more with you...but Ginny can't be *Slytherin*! She's a Weasley, they're all redheads and Gryffindors!" Ron protested.

Harry sighed. "There's your problem, Weasley...Ginny *is* Slytherin, and is whether I never speak to her again or not. You need to accept that, or we're going to have problems. That isn't a threat; that's a statement of fact."

Ron nodded. "It's just so...strange, I dunno...I don't trust you around her, and I don't like you...I mean...I dunno...you're a Parselmouth,

and you weren't at the Feast, and you're really sneaky and, I dunno..." he said lamely trailing off. Obviously, he couldn't truthfully say he thought that Harry was evil or Dark.

Of course, that brought up another question.

"I know exactly what you mean, Ron. I am who I am," Harry stated, looking him straight in the eyes. "And I'm not ashamed of it. My parents were Gryffindors...I'm not. It doesn't reflect badly on any of us."

"What House was your guardian in?"

"Ravenclaw...but that just proves my point. I'm not evil, Weasley. I despise Voldemort and everything he stands for. He took away my parents. I'll admit I have ambition, but as of now, I have no secret plans to succeed him. Ginny isn't dark, Ron. I'm teaching her things that may save her life one day. Like it or not, Ron, Voldemort isn't gone yet. I fought him last year, I know...and you know what?"

Ron shook his head, his eyes wide from these latest revelations.

"I nearly *died* because of it. I stood no chance against him. He was weaker than he's ever been, and he *still* nearly killed me. I've faced Death twice, Weasley. And it's *only* because my mother loved me so much that she gave her own life that I'm still here."

Ron muttered something incoherent, and Harry ignored it. "I don't like you, Weasley. I think you an impulsive, crude, attention-seeking *prat* who has played a large role in making my life a living hell. I don't trust you, because I think you'll jump on any possibility to win something over me, or get me in trouble, as if that's an accomplishment."

"I just...*I'm sorry*. I really am. I really shouldn't do that...it's below me...I *still* don't like you hanging out with my sister, though. You've got to admit its *weird* having your baby sister go off for two weeks with a boy you hate."

Harry snorted. "It's not going to be the two of us. Tonks, who will get along *famously* with Ginny, is going to be there, along with Daphne and Andromeda. I like Ginny as a good friend, nothing more, nothing

less. I suggest you stop thinking otherwise...and as for why she's going, it's because of you. You're doing it again, believing that taking her away from me for two weeks is something to be proud of. *All* you are doing is hurting her. She doesn't know what to do anymore. You've been such a git to her that she doesn't want to be around you, yet the things that you've been saying to her make her wonder if she's betraying your family. Are you *proud* of that, Weasley?"

"No," Ron said. "Look, I'm sorry. I really am...I just...I dunno, I wasn't thinking..."

"No," Harry said coldly, "you *weren't*. You need to grow up Ron, live in the real world. Because your social skills are *atrocious*."

And with that, Harry left the redhead, for the first time feeling that he'd made a breakthrough.

"-so let me get this straight."

"-Ickle Ginnikins-"

"-is staying with *you* for the holidays-"

"-which we aren't thrilled about-"

"-but we'll get over it-"

"-yes, we trust you Harry-"

"-we trust you to know that it might be a good idea not to come back to Hogwarts if you hurt her-"

"-but back to the subject of this long demonstration-"

"-of our ability to read each other's minds-"

"-Mum is going to let her precious, innocent little Ginevra-"

"-stay with some boy-"

“-for two weeks?” they finished together. Harry, who had managed to follow the whole conversation by looking at neither of the twins, simply listening to their voices, nodded.

“Daphne says that your mum was alright with the idea. Trust me, I won’t hurt her. I value her friendship too much for that...and yes, I know that you’ll kill me, or at least make my life a living nightmare, if I do something that isn’t...” Harry trailed off. It wasn’t like he’d do *anything* inappropriate. She was eleven years old!

“We knew we could count on you, Harrikins,” George began.

“Ickle Ronniekins may not like you, but you’re okay-“

“For a Slytherin, of course.”

Harry smiled. “You know, I know a few decent Slytherins. Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini aren’t that bad.”

“I dunno, Fred-“

“-afterall, Nott doesn’t have a sense of humor, and Zabini’s a bit sneaky-“

“-got Lee in trouble couple of weeks back-“

“-not surprising, seeing as he was hexing the area in front of the Slytherin Dormitory to turn to first person that exited it red and gold-“

“-using a modified Glamour Charm created by yours truly,” Fred said pompously.

“-I beg to differ, oh brother of mine. I believe that I was the one who perfected it.”

“Like I said,” Fred pointed out, “I created it. You perfected it.”

Harry leaned back against the wall next to the fireplace in the Gryffindor Dormitory. Word had gotten back to the twins that their little sister would be staying with the evil Slytherin mastermind, Harry Potter, and while they hadn’t been as...forceful in their protests,

despite the humor, it was obvious they weren't thrilled with the idea. Percy had simply walked up to him as he passed through the halls and told him to 'be civilized,' whatever the bloody hell that meant.

Hermione was across the room, talking to Angelina Johnson and Katie Bell about *something*. He had no idea what possible interests the two Gryffindor Chasers and the bookworm could share, but all three were breaking into giggles at random intervals, for seemingly no reason. As well as he knew Hermione and Ginny, Harry still found girls baffling at times.

"Oi! Harry, you with us?" George asked loudly, waving his hand in front of the black-haired boy's face.

Harry's attention snapped back onto the two pranksters in front of him. "I'm here. So you've given the okay to bring Ginny home with me?" he asked curiously.

George looked over at Fred and something unsaid passed between them. Then they both extended their hands, one left, and one right. Harry shook both of them without blinking. "All right then, Harry," George said. Harry could count the number of times any Weasley other than Ginny had called him by his first name on one hand.

"Don't worry," Harry said for what he thought might have been the tenth or eleventh time. Ginny'll have a great time with us. I can't wait until she meets Tonks."

"Oi, Harry-

"Is this 'Tonks'-

"-the same one that Charlie was going on about?" Fred asked curiously.

"The same," Harry said, smiling. "Oh, and watch this. Tonks discovered a little...talent of mine." He closed his eyes, and when he opened them, they were bright yellow. The twins jumped back in surprise.

"*Wicked!*" George exclaimed.

“You’re a Metamorphmagus?” Fred asked curiously.

Harry nodded. “Just tried to do what she described, and just like that, I turned my eyes blue. I’ve been training with her each summer. You two, Ginny, and Hermione are the only ones at school who know.”

“Wow, mate.”

“Yeah, hurry up and finish-“

“-that’s got some major prank potential.”

Harry laughed. “So suddenly I’m your mate because I have an ability other people don’t have. Where was the appreciation for my Parseltongue, and ability I didn’t even know I had.”

Fred and George’s faces darkened a bit. “Harry,” George said, using his first name again, “what did you tell that snake to do to Ickle Ronniekins?” The answer seemed rather important.

“Actually, I told it to back off, then summoned it to me so that I could blast it. I may not like your brother, but that was a black asp, and a bite from that could kill him.”

Fred whistled. “Well, that’s a relief.”

“You’ve got to understand though-“

“-that seeing you talk to snakes-“

“-is just creepy.”

Harry nodded. “I was a bit freaked out by it at first as well. I never knew I could do it, and recognized it the instant I said the words. It’s easy to tell; you understand it as English, but it’s a mental voice, while you can hear the actual hissing. Also, snakes are conditioned to obey ‘speakers’ without question.”

Fred nodded. “Hmmm, that’s an ability that might come in handy-“

“-yes, couldn’t we slip a garden snake up Sir Percival’s trousers-

“-garden snake of course, because they aren’t poisonous-“

“-but he’s been being a royal prat to Ickle Ginnikins-“

“-more or less all of us-“

“-all year,” they finished together.

“That he has,” Harry agreed. “What’s the story on him anyway? What does he want to do with his life?” Ginny had told him that Percy was ticketed for the ministry, but that wasn’t very specific. He didn’t understand the motives of the Prefect Weasley, and that bothered him. He liked to understand *why* people did things; it made it easier to predict how they’d behave in the future.

“Well, he wants to be a high-ranking Ministry official-“ Fred began.

“-no doubt the Minister himself, someday-“

“-can you ponder the horror-“

“-if Perfect Sir Percival-“

“-ran the wizarding world?”

“I guessing you’d probably flee the country. He’d make pranks a capital offense and insist that we all wear perfectly tailored clothing. He’d throw people into Azkaban for disrespect,” Harry replied jokingly. The twins nodded in sync.

“That sounds about right-“

“-needless to say-“

“-the world would be very boring-“

“-after all, you can’t have fun-“

“-without blowing something up once and a while,” they finished in unison. Harry laughed.

"I think I've started to get a handle on how to talk to both of you at once. I still would like to know how you two mentally communicate, thought," Harry admitted.

The twins smiled deviously. "We don't, actually, we do something else-

"-we're not completely sure what it is-

"-but it works for our purposes. We've researched twin bonds-

"-but never found anything like it-

"-all the better for us, we suppose."

"And all the worse for everyone else," Harry concluded, smiling. "I'm not committing to helping you with any pranks, especially not on my own housemates. I'm trying to make inroads, not make them hate me."

"That's reasonable enough," Fred admitted.

"Well, goodbye Harry," George said.

"Yeah, take care of Ickle Ginnikins, and we'll like you much more. We might even let you in on a little secret," Fred confided.

George slapped him upside the head. "Oh brother of mine, I don't believe we agreed upon that."

Harry chuckled as the two began to argue again, and approached the girls on the other side of the room. "Hello Potter," Angelina said brightly.

"Johnson," Harry responded in kind. "What ever you three are doing, it seems to be rather amusing." Hermione turned red and giggled a bit more. "I won't ask."

"Good idea," Katie Bell said, tucking a lock of brown hair behind her ear absently, "you won't get anything out of her. This was strictly a girl conversation."

“And yet so much more intelligent than any of things that Parvati and Lavender ever say,” Hermione added, beaming. Harry rolled his eyes.

“Well, I’m out of here, curfew’s soon. See you tomorrow Hermione,” Harry said as he turned to go.

“Bye Harry!” she called after him.

Severus Snape was not one who would be infected with holiday cheer anytime before the sun expanded and swallowed up the earth. In fact, one might have more luck cheering up the surly, bitter old Squib caretaker Argus Filch, despite the fact that his sole companion, who disturbingly enough happened to be a cat, lay Petrified in the Hospital Wing. Rumor were that he’d visit the animal after hours and cry over her.

Rumors that actually had a chance to be true, if anything Harry thought about the man was accurate.

After the last Transfiguration Class had involved Transfiguring maple branches into mistletoe, something proved to be a bit disastrous when Seamus set his branches on fire (the Irish boy had a tendency to try to force his magic, resulting in all of it being funneled into a small area. He tended to blow things up.

In Charms, when Flitwick had nearly been bouncing off the walls, they’d been given a simple fir tree, and given a list of spells to perform that could make it do anything from dance, to sing, to even create snow if the air was damp enough. Very little work had actually gotten done, but Hermione had apparently managed to make one that did all three, and planned to give it to her parents as proof that she was actually doing something at school.

Potions was another matter entirely. Obviously in a foul mood, Snape had decided that the day before Christmas Break was evidently the perfect time to assign the first antidote the class had ever attempted to brew. This particular one was used to cure snake bites from mild venoms, which normally paralyzed the target rather than killing it. It was immensely complex, and involved over twenty different ingredients, eight different stirs of varying length and direction, and

precise timing. Snape fully admitted that he simply wanted a decent effort, and expected few to be able to make the potion. Harry believed he was flicking his eyes between Neville Longbottom, Seamus Finnegan, Dean Thomas, and Ron Weasley as he said this.

Harry and Hermione had determined that they would make an absolutely perfect antidote just to avoid having to deal with his criticism today. Harry made a copy of the ingredients using a Copy Spell he'd picked up from Hermione, and the aforementioned bushy-haired bookworm measured out the ingredients with insane accuracy. Harry kept his eyes on his watch, and Hermione was perfect with her timing.

Weasley melted his cauldron, something that had him moaning (his parents might not be able to afford a new one), while Malfoy created something with the consistency of wet cement. If imbibed, it would probably suffocate the drinker before it had a chance to poison him. For that disaster, he merely got half-credit. Longbottom and Finnegan managed to not blow up their cauldron, but didn't exactly create a workable antidote either. Moon, working with Tracey Davis, a first year who had apparently been seriously ill the day of the Sorting, and had arrived at school three weeks late, created a perfect potion. He suspected that the Black girl had a chance of being a Potions Mistress. Davis was tall girl with curly brown hair and a permanently sour expression. He hadn't exchanged a word with her to date, and hadn't even noticed her presence this year. She hung out mostly with Malfoy and Pansy.

Harry approached Snape's desk with a sample of their potion, Hermione watching anxiously from their desk. Snape looked up. "Yes, Potter?"

"Our antidote, sir," Harry replied respectfully. Snape took it from his hands, and pointed his wand at it, whispering an incantation. The potion, which was dark blue, glowed yellow.

Snape actually smiled. "Excellent, Potter. One of the best attempts at this potion I've ever seen from a couple of second years. 10 points to Slytherin...and 10 points to Gryffindor," he said softly, though he said the last only with visible effort. There was a splash as Crabbe

dropped an entire vial into his potion, which began billowing black fumes. Snape's eyes widened. "OUT! ALL OF YOU! NOW!"

Ginny nervously stepped out of the train, and went over to where her trunk was (bearing a bright pink ribbon, as her mother hadn't seemed to realize she despised the color). She looked up, and saw that Harry was currently in the arms of a tall woman who Ginny judged would have been very attractive, with her athletic body, gorgeous grey-green eyes, and shining honey-blond hair, if not for a pair of terrible scars, one running through her right eye, another running down her neck. But she saw the same caring and smothering love in her eyes as she saw in her own mother's.

Daphne Dressler clearly loved Harry as her son. And Ginny's friend thought of the woman as his mother.

She saw Hermione hugging her own parents, then dragging them over to where Harry and Daphne were. She nervously approached, dragging her battered trunk towards them. She was suddenly aware of how poor her patched and frayed robes made her look, especially compared to the neat Muggle dress of the Grangers and the fine robes that Harry and Daphne wore. They weren't so much aesthetically pleasing as durable and comfortable. She tried to fight her jealousy, at least she had a real family, no matter how much some of her brothers could be gits at times. Daphne had apparently lost her parents at only fifteen, then her husband at twenty-one. Harry couldn't even remember his parents.

She approached the imposing woman anxiously. "Hi, Mrs. Dressler. I'm Ginny."

"Hello Ginny," Daphne replied kindly. "I'd really rather you call me Daphne."

"Okay," she replied brightly, trying to look up at the much taller woman. It was strange, because she was used to her mum, who was relatively short. Suddenly, there was a blur of motion, and Harry was knocked to the floor by a young woman with short, spiky pink hair and dark, twinkling eyes, wearing a t-shirt and blue jeans. Following her,

rolling her blue eyes and sighing, was a tall, stately-looking woman with long black hair and sharp features.

"Tonks! Get off me!" Harry cried helplessly. Tonks popped up off the ground, and as soon as Harry had gotten to his feet, seeking to recover his composure, she'd wrapped him in a ridiculously tight hug, saying something incomprehensible, and punctuating each word with a light whack on Harry's head. When she let go, he glared at her, then sighed.

"Ginny, meet Tonks. She has a first name, but I'd recommend you didn't use it: Nymphadora. Tonks, meet Ginny." The pink-haired girl smiled brightly at the redhead.

"Hello down there," she said, jokingly referring to their height difference. "I'm Harry's older sister." As she said this, she closed her eyes, and before Ginny's eyes, her hair turned black and grew long down her back, and her eyes turned into Harry's striking green. Ginny remembered that she was a Metamorphmagus.

"No you're not," Harry protested. "Potters are sane, remember?" Tonks glared at him, giving him a look saying clearly 'you'll pay for that later.'

Ginny had a feeling she just might like this girl.

Chapter 12: Mother in All but Blood

Daphne Dressler watched as her adopted son got off the Hogwarts Express. The untamable black hair of his father, the skinny frame of a twelve-year old, and of course, the emerald green eyes of Lily Potter, his mother, the closest thing to a sister that she had ever had. She'd had a sibling, a brother...once.

A brother who was murdered at the age of three by Voldemort's Death Eaters, his young, innocent, all-too-short existence snuffed out by a Killing Curse. A mere child, caught up in a war he had no hope of comprehending.

Andrew

She shuddered, and with all her will, forced the black memories of her past back behind the impenetrable walls of magical energy she'd created with the help of Albus Dumbledore eighteen years ago. She'd moved past it. She'd gone on to live her life, to graduate, to marry...

To raise a child; even if she couldn't claim she carried that child in her womb.

Again, she shoved those troubling, disturbing, horrifying memories aside, forcing them back into her mental prison. She *had* to live in the present now, to focus. Harry was her life, her light. As strange as it was, the boy that she could not trace any relation too, whom she'd seen perhaps twice before that horrible Halloween, meant more to her than Edmond ever could have. She had loved her husband dearly; he'd been a breath of fresh air, a fun-loving, intelligent man who could be deceptive and devious when he wanted to, but most of the time loving and caring, a man she'd hoped to spend the rest of her life with, raising several beautiful children in a world at peace, with Voldemort nothing more than a bad memory.

How wrong she was.

Daphne's thought vanished as her adopted son ran forward, a look of absolute adoration on his face, and embraced his mother.

His mother in all but blood.

His protector, his mentor, his constant companion.

She hugged him tightly to her chest, fighting the tears that wanted to well up in her eyes. It wasn't proper to break down like this; she was in public. Daphne was an emotional woman, and her emotions could sometimes get the better of her, but she *never* showed weakness in public.

She put on a true smile as she saw the daughter of Molly Weasley nervously approaching. The redhead was only a bit shorter than her mother, even at age eleven. She had the trademark Weasley red-hair, though it was darker than Molly's. She'd probably inherited it from Arthur's parents, who had also been redheads, though Ginny's grandmother hair had been closer to auburn. She had her mother's warm brown eyes, eyes that were currently searching the immediate area, betraying her anxiety.

If Daphne could truly say so, she'd say the only girl Weasley in generations was adorable. Though from what Harry had said, she wasn't nearly as innocent or helpless and Molly believed. Daphne preferred it that way. She'd never had the chance to grow up naïve and innocent, even before her parents had been murdered.

Harry, though, had grown up too fast. It wasn't as though he had a choice, though, Daphne thought sadly. The confrontation with Voldemort the previous year had stripped away a large part of his innocence, which had never been really there to begin with.

Perhaps the innocence, but not the naivety. Harry had had an advanced understanding of how terrible people could be to each other from a young age, mostly from his reading.

In addition, Daphne had hid nothing from him...at least not any of the events themselves. The details, well, she preferred not to remember them herself.

Daphne stifled a laugh as Tonks tackled Harry to the ground. The nineteen-year old had to return to Auror School for her mid-semester exams almost immediately, but she insisted upon coming to see Harry. Andromeda would simply be returning home with them. She and Daphne had renewed an old friendship and now sent owls to

each other daily. Andromeda made good conversation, and was also a source of information on Ministry activity as an employee at St. Mungo's.

The two exchanged words, and Daphne had to hide her laugh as Tonks hugged him and began whispering something to him, hitting him over the head lightly. Ginny was watching with bemused eyes.

Tonks evidently told him that she'd be back, for she departed soon after. Andromeda, as always, showed little emotion, but even she seemed amused by the antics of her daughter. "I always knew she'd be like this," she confided. "Even when she was in my womb, she was always moving."

Daphne laughed, and greeted the Grangers politely. Hermione gave both Harry and Ginny a hug, then left with the Muggles, talking excitedly. Daphne had been slightly bothered by how badly Jane and Gregory Granger had taken her confrontation with Lucius Malfoy.

She hoped that they'd never have reason to pull Hermione out, though he suspected that she might refuse to leave. The young witch was as eager to learn as she and Lily had been, and while Ginny physically resembled Lily, Hermione was the one that truly reminded her of her best friend.

Both were eager, intelligent, and hard-working Muggleborn witches from families that were enthusiastic about the possibility of magic, but nervous about the potential dangers. Hermione was an only child, which merely exacerbated the problem.

Lily had a sister, Petunia, a woman who if Daphne ever saw her again, it would be too soon. The woman was jealous and bitter that she didn't have Lily's looks and abilities, and had married an obese and crude Muggle named Vernon Dursley. The woman probably hadn't even cared when her sister had been murdered, probably believing she'd 'blown herself up,' or something like that.

Lily and Daphne had met about a week into their time at Hogwarts. They'd been in classes together, but they'd never had a real conversation up to that point. Daphne hadn't been particularly fond of her fellow Ravenclaws, and while eventually, they were nice enough

human beings, she'd still always preferred the company of Ali Walker, Ellie Bradway, and of course Lily Evans.

All three were Gryffindors, and would marry to become Alice Longbottom, who had been tortured into insanity by the Lestranges, Elisha Finnegan, who became a bit too intolerant and judgemental at times, and Lily Potter, who had borne the child she now called her own.

Lily had been so intelligent and eager to learn. She'd impressed all her Professors with her work ethic and genuine desire to be the best she could be. Her natural talent at Charms and Potions had made her the favorite pupil of Slughorn and Flitwick, and also earned a great deal of resentment from her peers, who were upset at being upstaged by a Muggleborn.

Daphne had also been a star pupil as a young girl, but was quiet and unassuming. She remembered that she did work like a machine; as efficiently and painlessly as possible. She'd excelled at Transfiguration and Defense Against the Dark Arts; so much so that at age twelve, after she performed a Shielding Charm strong enough to fully block a Bludgeoning Hex, her professor, an ex-Auror trainer named Professor Blackwell, had declared that she was ticketed for a career with the Aurors.

She'd done her best to live up to that high praise, and she and a man she wished she'd never met, Sirius Black, had risen to the top of the school as two of the best duelists in school history. Black had been lucky in the few duels she had won.

Another competitor, Severus Snape, she preferred to forget entirely. She'd barely prevented the ex-Death Eater from doing something to Lily she might have killed him for. Snape was apologetic, but somehow blamed *Daphne* for it.

The man was sick and twisted from an abusive childhood and almost a score of Housemates who had become Death Eaters. He'd been up to his arm pits in Dark Magic by fifteen. She'd not been averse to learning Dark Magic, but as a student, at least until after her parents had been murdered, she limited herself to the Severing Curse on occasion.

It still earned her a reputation, however.

Snape had a particular favorite, the *Sectumsempra* Slashing Curse, which Daphne believed he'd invented himself. It had become a favorite of Antonin Dolohov and Rudolphus Lestrangle, because the wound was resistant to normal Healing Spells.

They had managed to live in relative peace, until the war had come to Daphne...

They'd arrived at the Apparition Point, and Daphne shoved her memories to the back of her mind, performing a quick Occlumency exercise to stabilize her emotions enough to safely Apparate. Ginny took Andromeda's hand, while Harry took hers, both of them clutching their trunks, and in Harry's case, his familiar. They apparated onto the lawn in front of the Manor, and Daphne heard an intake of breath from the youngest Weasley.

She was obviously impressed by the opulence of her late husband's family. As the sole survivor of two lines of pureblood wizards, Daphne was one of the richest witches in Britain. Harry was one of the richest wizards in Britain, simply from inheriting the Potter fortune.

Ginny's eyes widened as they entered the entrance hall, even more so when she saw Harry run forward and jump into his favorite chair. Daphne felt a bit guilty; she'd been the Burrow, a lop-sided home held up only by magic. It had a very nice atmosphere, but it could be cramped, and the types of furniture found here would have no place there.

She walked over and placed a hand on the redhead's shoulder. "Don't worry, Ginny. I know that this is probably a shock. I've been to the Burrow, though, and it's certainly no dump." Ginny's frown brightened a little, so she continued. "This is an ancestral home, one that we barely use. I use only the money I need, Harry's the same. We inherited this, I earned very little of it. You should be proud of your father for being brave enough to work in a low-paying department, and still able to support a large family."

Ginny nodded. "Not many in the Ministry are concerned with Muggles."

“Yes, that’s because so many of them are purebloods. Even Light pureblood families, including my own and Edmond’s, have a low opinion of Muggles. It dates back to things such as the Salem Witch Trials and other religious movements that have led to the persecution of the magical community. Others simply believe that the Muggles’ lack of magical cores makes them inferior. Either way, it is men like your father that keep this world a secret. Some wizards are far too lax with what they charm and how.”

Ginny beamed at the praise of her father. “Dad works really hard, to try to make ends meet...we’ve got a big family, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Daphne smiled sadly at the happy redhead, remembering what became of her own family. She was glad that Harry’s friend at least had the perspective to see how lucky she really was.

Though Daphne had Harry...

And that was enough.

Daphne walked into one of the sitting rooms, where the inhabitants and houseguests were spending a blustery, snowy day four days before Christmas. The house-elves had built a massive fire that was now warming the entire mansion.

Andromeda was leaning back in an old, antique red armchair, reading the *Daily Prophet*. Ginny Weasley, bundled up in a red sweater with a pink ‘G’ that her mother had made the previous winter, was sitting on the carpet, legs crossed, leaning against the couch doing homework. Her adopted son was lying on his stomach on that couch, writing in his diary.

Daphne wasn’t extremely comfortable about her son constantly writing in the diary; mostly because she didn’t know where it came from. Harry claimed that he got it from an older Slytherin, but he obviously wasn’t telling the truth, as Daphne had asked Ginny about it, and she said he’d had it with him from his first day. She nervously (she felt like she might be betraying her friend and childhood idol) told Daphne that the diary was magical, and that Harry wrote to an

intelligence that he called 'Tom.' Daphne wasn't shocked; she'd seen countless diaries that responded to their users before. She understood that Harry valued his privacy, and decided that she'd trust him to tell her if something was wrong.

She had asked him directly about it, and he admitted that he'd just found it, and wasn't sure where it came from. He assured her that Tom was harmless, and that he was actually very interesting to talk to. Daphne could detect no lies, and decided to let it go.

It was strange how protective of the diary he was, though. Once, when Ginny had come in to Harry's room as she was unpacking and he was writing a letter to Hermione, the diary had been knocked onto the floor. Ginny had bent to pick it up, but Harry practically dove for it, snatching it off the ground. Ginny had jumped back, and looked more than a bit frightened. When Daphne had asked, Harry had sheepishly admitted that he was constantly having to work to ensure his privacy from Malfoy and his bodyguards, and got a bit snappish at times when it was threatened. He'd been rather embarrassed, and Daphne had tried to stop herself from worrying about it.

It was probably just her overprotective tendencies getting the better of her; after all, with the exception of the previous year, he's never neglected to tell her if something was wrong. And he'd understood of the reasons why he should have told her about his social problems.

It still haunted her how close she'd come to losing him twice the previous year. She'd been in shock from Halloween, hit by the anniversary of Lily's death, Harry clinging to life after being savaged by a troll that had *somehow* found its way inside the castle...and then finding out that it was Harry's destiny to defeat a wizard who could no longer be called human, and had likely advanced further along the path to immortality than any who had come before him. Even the Flamels were required to constantly drink the Elixir of Life to continue their long lives.

The second time, she'd been awakened in the middle of the night by a grave-looking Dumbledore, who had little time to tell her about how Harry had confronted Voldemort, prevented his acquisition of the

Philosopher's Stone, and was now lying unconscious in the Hospital Wing with his best friend Hermione.

She'd demanded to come immediately, and this time, Dumbledore didn't have a Prophecy to distract her. He'd reluctantly agreed. She'd apparated to Hogwarts, and the first person she'd run into after making the trek up the road from Hogsmeade had been Minerva McGonagall. Her old Transfiguration Professor looked to be devastated.

She'd learned things that shocked her from that conversation. Things that made her feel extremely guilty.

As Daphne entered the Entrance Hall of Hogwarts, she saw someone that she hadn't seen since she'd entered Dumbledore's office for the first time in ten years. Her first sight, besides the various wizarding paintings and suits of armor, had been of her old Transfiguration Professor, Minerva McGonagall, who appeared to be wandering the hallways aimlessly. She froze when she saw Daphne.

"Daphne? I suppose Albus must have called you..." she said, her hand still hovering over her heart from being startled the best student she'd ever taught...well, her and James Potter...

"He did," Daphne said, not betraying the anxiety she was feeling about the current state of the boy she thought of as her son. "He didn't want me to come, but I can be...persuasive at times."

"More likely you simply told him you were on your way," Minerva correctly guessed. She began mumbling to herself.

"What's wrong, Minerva?" Daphne asked, genuinely concerned.

"It's my fault...all of it. It's my fault that a pair of First Years, including your ward, nearly died tonight," she admitted miserably. Daphne was shocked to see tears in her eyes.

"I don't understand."

"They came to me, Mister Potter and Miss Granger, that is. They told me that someone was after the Stone, but the very thought was ridiculous..."

"I suppose it must have seemed that way," Daphne admitted, not entirely convinced.

"It did. After all he's done, when Albus says that something is safe, I assume that it's safe. I certainly didn't assume that a pair of First Years could get through the defenses surrounding the Stone," she said in her trademark Scottish brogue. She wiped a few tears from her eyes. "I must admit Daphne, that I'm ashamed of the way I acted towards Harry. I had my heart set on him as a Gryffindor."

Daphne nodded. "I warned you," she reminded her.

Minerva nodded. "You did...and I chose to ignore it. I've been, well...oblivious to all the problems he's been having. I never imagined that Severus was treating him so terribly, that he was suffering from horrible nightmares, that he was all alone..."

Daphne stared. "What?"

Minerva looked up at her in surprise. "You didn't know? He didn't tell you?"

All Daphne could do was shake her head. "I know that he didn't have any real friends until he met Hermione...but he assured me that he was doing fine. He lied, apparently."

Minerva nodded. "I found him in front of the Mirror of Erised, crying...and I still did NOTHING!" she cried angrily. "The poor boy..."

"The Mirror of Erised?" Daphne repeated in disbelief. "Dumbledore placed that, that deathtrap where Harry could reach it?"

Minerva started. "Perhaps your wording is a bit strong..."

"Oh really," Daphne snapped. "So the first eight owners of the Mirror didn't starve themselves because they lost the will to live...god, he's lost so much, Merlin knows what he saw..."

Minerva stuttered. "A-A-Albus t-t-told me that he saw his family. He saw Lily and James. He saw you, and Edmond...and your son."

Daphne stared, her emotions threatening to overwhelm her. "...my god..." she breathed. Suddenly, something that she had heard earlier came to the forefront of her mind. "What was that about Severus?" she asked sharply, barely managing to keep the rage out of her voice.

She'd been ready to kill him when she discovered that he was using Legillimacy on Harry, and had expressed that exactly to Dumbledore. Snape had apparently stopped deliberately violating Harry's mind, though no doubt he'd still 'skim' Harry's surface thoughts, something that would happen to a sensitive Legillimens such as him or Daphne.

"Severus's behavior was...reprehensible. As was the behavior of some of my own students...ostracizing him, making up rumors about him...you would have thought he was You-Know-Who come back to life!"

Daphne took a deep breath. She'd expected that some might resent Harry's placement and magical ability...but never in her wildest dreams had she imagined this.

"I'll deal with him," she said coldly. "Harry's in the Hospital Wing, correct?" Minerva nodded.

"He and Miss Granger will likely be unconscious for quite some time...they took quite a beating..." she trailed off, her feelings of guilt clearly getting to her.

"Thank you, Minerva," she said honestly. Then she flew up the stairs, robes billowing behind her, on the way to the Hospital Wing.

Daphne sighed as she remembered that conversation. She found that she was staring out one of the ornate windows on the ground floor of the manor. The manor house could hardly be considered a mansion; though it featured ten bedrooms, she'd seen far larger family homes. And four of those bedrooms hadn't seen the light of day in nearly twelve years. There was simply no need for them.

She turned her eyes back to Harry, who had just whispered something in Ginny's ear that made the redhead turn around, a puzzled, but amused look on her face, and giggle quietly. Harry smirked at something that she said. *Those two are so cute together* she thought, *not at all like James and Lily at that age.*

Lily couldn't stand the immature, spoiled, pureblooded Gryffindor. Daphne hadn't thought much of him either, to be perfectly honest.

On the other hand, by age twelve, it was obvious to anyone with one or more eyes that James was absolutely smitten by the young Muggleborn. And he was so awkward and yet blatant about it, it made Lily resent him even more. It hadn't gotten much better, as his crush morphed into an infatuation and eventually, into love. Lily had finally decided to go out with James, who'd been asking her for years, after she'd seen him comforting a scared-looking first year who'd had a nightmare. Lily said it was one of the most shocking things she'd ever seen. They hadn't actually kissed until their second date (the first was nearly ruined by the presence of the class clown and superb duelist turned traitor, Sirius Black, along with Peter Pettigrew, the man he'd end up killing).

Of all the Marauders, the one she'd been closest to was Remus. So much so that he'd actually asked her to go to Hogsmeade with him during their fifth year. She had agreed, as nothing had developed to that point between her and Edmond, who while he was her friend, didn't seem to have any type of deeper feelings for her at that point. The date had been pleasant, but nothing had come of it. She was still waiting patiently for Edmond Dressler, and Remus was terrified of possibly hurting another person due to his 'condition.' Daphne had known he was a werewolf by Third Year. He'd done his best, but few things escaped her.

Especially because the windows in Ravenclaw Tower overlooked the grounds. And on many a full moon, she'd seen various teachers and a skinny boy walking down to the Whomping Willow. She'd researched werewolf symptoms and normal appearances, and his thin frame, his tired appearance, and the slight amber glint in his eyes told her all she needed to know. She'd told Lily, of course, who said

she'd suspected something of the sort. Remus had been shocked to learn they'd found out.

But while she had spent some time with him, his true friends were his fellow Marauders. Illegal Animagi, legendary pranksters, and with the exception of Pettigrew, excellent students, the Marauders had been the bane of Argus Filch's existence. And Severus Snape's.

So incorrigible that their leader had become Head Boy, while his girlfriend became Head Girl. That had always bothered Daphne. She rarely was jealous of her best friend, but she felt that she should have been chosen for that duty...and she didn't know how it was possible that James had earned the honor over Remus, or even Edmond, who was a model student.

She sighed, remembering those days. Of course, James had acquitted himself well during the Siege of Hogwarts. She'd lost friends, she'd killed for the first time, and her entire generation had been introduced to the horrors of war in those three days of hell. She tried not to think about it.

What Moody had said had been very true: the first one is always the worst.

She didn't even know the name of the Death Eater whom she had decapitated. She supposed it didn't matter. Still, it was a moment that would haunt her for a long time.

Though she supposed it made it easier. For when she killed the next time, just outside the perimeter of Rowan and Helga McCourns hideout, when she hit a man full on with a Severing Curse that nearly bisected him, she felt no guilt, no remorse. The man was a Death Eater, and he was the enemy. When she tortured the McCourns, she felt no remorse either. She was exacting vengeance for her parents and infant brother. She tortured them endlessly, mocking them, spitting on them.

She did not kill them. She waited until they were no longer capable of coherent thought, when they were no longer capable of begging for mercy. She got Rowan to plead before she destroyed his mind, though Helga simply screamed and glared at her. Then she calmly

waited for the Aurors to take them to Azkaban. She had no fear of being imprisoned with them; Barty Crouch had already made it legal to use Unforgivables against Death Eaters. Besides, would they really care what a broken-hearted, enraged seventeen-year old had done to a man and a woman they'd been chasing for almost a decade?

Of course, she'd been wrong in her estimation. The Aurors hadn't been the first to arrive; the Order had. The first one on the scene had been Minerva McGonagall, and once more, she stared in shock and horror at Daphne as she stood over the twitching bodies of the McCourns. She'd tried to console her like an abused child, but Daphne had shook her off. After seeing the two insane Death Eaters taken off by the Aurors, she'd left without answering questions.

She had felt some guilt, some twinge of regret for her repeated use of the Unforgivables. It had been a crime of passion, there was no doubt of that, but she had known what she was doing. She had been cold and deliberate in the execution. She'd probably been fortunate no one ever leaked to the press that the Auror's prodigy had done the same thing that had later nearly earned Bellatrix Lestrange a death sentence.

She once more forced herself out of those dark memories, out of the horrors of her past. *It's in the past; I've moved on*, she reminded herself. *Besides, there is something more important in my life*, she thought, smiling at the sight of her beloved...son, she supposed.

And as his mother, it was her duty to prepare him. She understood what the prophecy meant; some day, Harry would stand across from Lord Voldemort, beginning a duel to the death. She couldn't force that reality on him right now, but she needed to begin to prepare him...in case she wasn't there when it finally happened.

She knew that was a possibility. After all, she was always at the front of the charge. She was fearless without being foolhardy, confident without being arrogant, respectful without being fearful. She knew her limits, and in most cases, could determine the limits of her opponents. Dueling was not a matter of power and brute strength; as it was with the sword, it was a matter of quickness in both movement and

thinking. It was also a matter of luck, something that Daphne seemed to utterly lack at times and have an abundance of at others.

She needed to begin his physical training. She was still in the best shape of almost anyone of her age; she'd been keeping herself in top physical condition since the age of fifteen. And it had paid off, her body was a finely-tuned fighting unit, with a fine head upon its shoulders. Harry was certainly not out of shape, between his Quidditch lessons and fast metabolism, but he was far from what he needed to be, if simply for the purpose of endurance. Duels took a toll on their participants, not only mentally and magically, but physically. Yet one couldn't become heavily muscled and claim to have improved their odds of survival. She'd start the summer after this school year. *The girls will probably appreciate as well*, she thought with amusement. After all, many boys at Hogwarts had been unable to keep their eyes off her. She didn't pay any heed to the attention, gratification of her ego or pride in her body was not very high on her priority list, if indeed it existed at all.

Of course, it was more than physical training; Harry would need to learn magic far beyond what was expected for a wizard of his age. Already, at the age of twelve, he could create and hold a Shielding Spell, and perform a Cutting Curse. It was an excellent start, and indicative of his drive and internal motivation to be the best he could be. While Daphne was not an ideal role model at times, she certainly had no problems with Harry aspiring to match her success with the Aurors. She hoped to keep him away from the darker aspects of her life.

He was aware of them because the last thing she wished was for Harry not to trust her. They trusted each other implicitly, simply because they'd never failed before the previous year. Harry's judgment was well beyond his years, and Daphne understood that she couldn't nursemaid him through the coming war. He would have to be a leader, a powerful wizard who could gain support with his actions far more than his words. That was the definition of a true war leader.

She also understood that Harry would and could not stand alone against Voldemort. The next war would not be limited to Europe, it

would be global, if only in the sense that both armies would draw from far-flung continents, even if the battles were fought in England and on the European mainland. Harry would need to awe some, convince others, and threaten the rest into line. And she was confident that he could do all of these things.

She would train him well. That was all one could do.

Fate owed Harry James Potter a debt for taking his parents from him, and throwing the weight of the universe upon him.

And if she had her way, fate would pay that debt.

Chapter 13: Mistress of Mayhem

"Wotcher, Ginny!" Tonks said, appearing the doorway to the guestroom that Ginny was using. Ginny looked up from the book she was reading.

Tonks was currently sporting long blond hair that flowed down her back, and bright blue eyes. She still had the same face; she admitted that she liked the shape of it, and it also made it possible for her mother and others to identify her.

Ginny waved weakly, yawning. "Wotcher Tonks."

Tonks grinned widely, then jumped onto her bed. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Reading," Ginny answered simply. "How do you have this much energy this late?" It was eleven o'clock, and Harry had already gone to bed, though Ginny suspected he was still reading.

"Good genes," she explained, bouncing on the bed. "You can't be ready to sleep now?"

Ginny yawned, answering her question. "I'll be out like a rock soon."

Tonks grinned evilly. "Is there going to be a certain black-haired, green-eyed, lighting-scarred boy occupying your dreams?"

Ginny felt her cheeks burn. "No," she replied a bit too quickly. Actually, she was lying. She'd had a dream of Harry the previous night. More specifically, a dream that involved Harry kissing her. Her inability to bury this silly crush was driving her crazy...and of course Tonks had to bring it up.

Tonks was wearing a sly smile. "I don't believe you," she replied in a sing-song voice. "So, what *were* you two doing?" she asked suggestively. Ginny knew she was blushing horribly now.

"Tonks! *Please stop!*" she pleaded. She'd actually grown to like the fun-loving Auror trainee, but she could now see why she drove Harry up the wall at times.

She'd actually walked in on what appeared to be Harry and Tonks in a fairly...compromising situation.

Of course, the only reason that Tonks had been sprawled on top of Harry was to tickle torture him. Once she'd realized what was going on, she'd rooted the girl on, especially when Harry tried to escape and she tackled him. After Harry admitted she was the most beautiful girl in the universe, Tonks let him go, but not before smacking him in the head and kissing him on the cheek, before she walked past the stunned pre-teens, whistling a random tune. Harry had stared after her, a dazed and confused look in his eyes, before he shook his head, muttering something like, "...crazy wench..."

"Why should I?" Tonks asked rhetorically, bringing her back to the present. "It's so much fun." She sounded like a kid in a candy store as she bounced on Ginny's mattress.

"Because I asked you to?" Ginny tried desperately, trying to fight down her blush.

"Did you *kiss* him in this dream?" Tonks asked instead. Ginny's cheeks burned for the third time.

She nodded weakly, figuring that Tonks would keep going until she got the answer out of her anyway.

"HA!" she cried triumphantly. "*Ginny luuuves Harrrry! Ginny luuuves Harry-*"

"Would you *shut it?*" a very sleepy looking Harry asked from the doorway. His glasses were slightly askew, and his messy hair was even worse than usual. He was also wearing just a pair of pajamas, and Ginny nearly slapped herself when she looked more closely at him. *STOP IT!* she screamed at herself.

"No," Tonks replied stubbornly. "Did you know that Ginny dreams of *kissing you*, Harry?" Ginny felt like she was going to die of embarrassment.

Harry coughed. Still, despite the slight pink that appeared on his cheeks, Harry did a pretty good job of appearing unfazed. "It hadn't

entered my mind, no,” he replied smoothly. Tonks’ wicked grin faded a bit from the lack of reaction.

“You are way too serious at times, Harry! Why won’t you help me torment her?”

“Why do you have to torment my friend at...10:45 at night?” Harry asked, checking his watch.

“It’s my duty. It’s a kind of initiation.”

“*More like hazing,*” Harry muttered under his breath. Tonks glared at him.

“I heard that!”

“Heard what?” Harry asked innocently.

“You know what!” Tonks yelled, losing her composure.

“I don’t know what, Nymphadora!” Andromeda said, standing in the doorway in a bathrobe. “Except that its late, you shouldn’t be harassing someone half your size and eight years younger than you, and you can do it tomorrow if you really can’t resist!”

Tonks pouted. “Why?”

“Act your age, *please,*” Harry whined.

“Nymmy, bed,” Andromeda commanded. “I don’t care how old you are; until you have your own flat, you follow my orders, young lady. Bed. Now.”

“Fine, Mum,” Tonks complained, sounding to all the world like a petulant nine-year old. Harry smirked, and she turned around, glared at him, and stuck her tongue out at him. Andromeda rolled her eyes and left the room.

Tonks immediately closed her eyes, and her hair grew long and black, her figure stately and regal, and her eyes blue. Now looking like a slightly shorter version of Andromeda, she proceeded to mock her

mother's scolding, causing Ginny to giggle. Harry smirked at her and closed his own eyes. When he opened them, his hair was bubblegum pink and slightly spiky, his eyes were dark and twinkling, and he was now wearing a lop-sided grin on his face.

He then proceeded to walk forward and intentionally trip over Ginny's bag. Ginny lost it as she saw the absolutely murderous expression on the older Metamorphmagus's face. She howled with laughter, rolling around on the bed. Tonks's glare was replaced with a pouting expression, and she crossed her arms indignantly.

"Last I checked, Harry, I wasn't a boy," Tonks huffed.

Harry smirked. "You sure about that?" he replied slyly. Tonks stiffened noticeably.

"*What did you just say?*" she hissed dangerously. Harry's eyes widened slightly, but he appeared mostly unfazed.

"I asked if you were sure about that," Harry replied innocently.

"*I'LL TURN YOU INTO A GIRL!*" she yelled, and lunged at Harry, who ducked out of the way and slipped out the door. There was a soft patter of footsteps, and the sound of a door slamming.

Tonks pulled her wand, evidently planning to unlock the door and exact revenge. She stalked towards doorway and ran directly into Daphne, who, at eleven o'clock at night, looked wide awake and alert. "What's going on in here?"

"I'm going to kill Harry," Tonks explained. "Do you mind?"

Daphne mock-sighed. "Can you at least give him time to say a few prayers? I promise you can hang him from the ceiling rafters naked if that's what you wish." Ginny nearly beat her head into the wall when a very small, *disgusting* part of her vaguely expressed interest in the last.

"I don't know about that...I don't want to embarrass Ginny too much..." Tonks said. Ginny's cheeks burned again.

Daphne sighed for real this time. "Go to bed, Nymphadora. That's an order!" she snapped. Tonks suddenly stiffened.

"Yes Grey Maiden Ma'am," she replied, and walked out the door.

Ginny threw a questioning look at her. "Mild compulsion, appeals to Auror training," she explained. "I'm referred to there as the Grey Maiden, so that's why she called me that...I have to wonder how someone like Andy produced a crazy maniac like her..." she yawned, glancing at her watch. "Time to get to bed...good night, Ginny."

"Good night Daphne...maybe you'd best check on Harry...Tonks might be seeking revenge-"

There was a crash, a yell of pain, and some unladylike cursing.

"...and Harry might have activated the wards on his door," she replied, sighing. "I suppose I should do just that."

As it turned out, Tonks hadn't taken being hurled across the hallway particularly well, and had waited patiently, crouching near the stairs, for Harry to come down for breakfast. When he had, obviously not expecting an ambush, she'd tackled him, forced him to the ground, pulled his hand behind his back, and began to repeatedly beat his head into the carpeted floor. Ginny had been slightly concerned, but the exchange of insults going on between the two Metamorphmagi had kept her in a fit of laughter. Finally, Daphne had come in, and kindly asked Tonks to refrain from abusing her ward.

Later, Ginny had had the opportunity to observe a Metamorphic training session that Tonks was giving Harry. She'd stayed for a while, but the only thing that Harry seemed to be capable of changing at the present moment had been his hair and eye color, and that was still inconsistent. Tonks refused to teach

Harry how to make any other physical alterations until he had the basics down; a half-completed transformation could leave his nose sticking out of his forehead and mean a trip to St. Mungo's.

“...excellent!” Tonks cried as Harry shifted his eye color from green to orange, which gave him a rather curious look.

“What happened?” Harry asked. He obviously couldn’t see his own face. Tonks frowned, then got up and began hurriedly rummaging through her bag.

“Tonks?” Harry asked.

“Just a second, Harry...there we go,” she said, as she pulled a small mirror from her bag.

“Are my looks *that* awful?” Harry asked deadpan, raising his eyebrows.

Tonks glared at him. “You’d make a hag cry with joy...now take the bloody thing!”

Harry snatched it from her. “Hmmm...that wasn’t what I wanted,” he said, gazing at his orange pupils.

Tonks frowned. “What were you aiming for?”

“Purple,” Harry replied. “The same purple you’ve been using. It’s easier to concentrate when you’ve got it in front of you.” Tonks eyes lit up.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Tonks replied, “you’ll have to make due.”

“Alright then,” Harry shrugged. Ginny was finding this a little less interesting.

“I’ll see you guys later,” she said as she got up to leave.

“Bored already?” Tonks asked. “Oh well, see you at dinner, Ginny.”

Harry waved goodbye to her with his eyes closed.

She began wandering through the hallways, looking for something to do. Dressler Manor was quite a change from what she was used to.

From the huge library in which they might never find Hermione again, to the classic wizarding portraits, to the finely polished oak floor and carved ceilings, to the antique furniture, this was an entirely different environment than the Burrow. It was like Hogwarts, only with the same home atmosphere of the Burrow.

She fought down her jealousy as she passed a portrait of Edmond's grandfather, Nicholas Dressler. *Remember why they live her, Ginny. Harry lives her because his parents are dead, Daphne lives here because he husband is dead. Remember how she told you that they had wanted to live in nice, average-sized home and start a family? Well, she never got the chance to do that. You have no right to be jealous, especially because you've got the big family that both of them have always wanted...*

She heard muffled banging sounds that sounded like explosions coming from the right side of the house. Curious, she walked towards the origin and pushed open the door, revealing what appeared to be a type of gymnasium that had been equipped with a target range, gymnast pads, and had walls lined with diagrams of fighting stances and tactics.

She looked closer, and saw someone twirling around; firing perfectly-target spells at moving targets that appeared to be shooting Stinging Hexes back at her. It was Daphne. She was clad in only a bodysuit, and her eyes were hard with determination and focus.

Ginny watched in awe as the graceful woman spun in wide arcs, precisely targeting and hitting certain targets with Blasting Hexes. She didn't appear to even be speaking, and Ginny figured she must have learned the art of non-verbal spell casting.

"...Cease..." she commanded, and the targets stopped. She took a deep breath, and turned around. "Hello Ginny," she said calmly. She Summoned a towel over to her and began wiping over her sweat-soaked body. A body that Ginny realized many women would kill to have.

"Hi Daphne," she began shyly, uncertain if it had been the best idea to intrude upon her training session. "I'm s-s-sorry if I interrupted..."

Daphne waved it off. "Don't worry," she said, taking a few deep breaths. "I was just finishing anyway. You should feel honored," she replied with not a little amusement. "Very few get to see a private training session of the Grey Maiden. Even fewer get to see this much of me," she said with a smirk, indicating her body."

Ginny stuttered, "I..."

"Don't worry about it, I was just joking around with you," she said, putting on a robe. She walked over to her. "So what are Harry and Tonks up to?"

"Um...they're working on their Metamorphmagus stuff," she answered. It was rather strange seeing this woman like this. Ginny was probably just being naïve, she knew about Daphne's past. Still, practicing like her life was on the line, ten years after the fall of You-Know-Who? It certainly wouldn't fit her own mother. Then again, her own mother wasn't exactly the warrior Daphne was, though she had no doubt she'd fight just as hard to defend her children. In that, her Mum and Daphne were completely alike.

Daphne shook her head. "I've predicted a lot of things when it comes to Harry, but his being a Metamorphmagus was certainly not one of them. Still, Harry and Tonks seems to have a connection because of it, and as playful as she can be, she's a great young woman and a good influence...and I think her antics are just what we both need at times." Ginny was inclined to agree; she never saw Harry as relaxed as he was when Tonks was with him.

"I think she's good for him. I like her a lot too," Ginny admitted.

Daphne smiled. "If there's one thing Harry's done well, it's been choosing his friends." Ginny blushed at the inherent praise.

"Harry's always been like that," she continued. "He hasn't made many friends, but when he has, they've been both close and loyal. He's also usually on at least neutral terms with everyone...but I suppose it was easier when he was just James Dressler and not the Boy-Who-Lived..."

Ginny frowned. "Why did you change his name? Surely you could keep the press away."

Daphne laughed. "That's harder than it seems. I've got good information that at least one of the Prophet reporters is an illegal animagus, but that wasn't the reason. Dumbledore...he wanted to give Harry to his only remaining blood relative...terrible woman, and her husband is worse. I couldn't let that happen."

"I don't understand," Ginny said. "If she was so awful, why would he want to send Harry there?"

Daphne sighed; something old and weary clouded her eyes. "Dumbledore is a great wizard, one of the best in history. But he's got one major flaw, and that is that he's too trusting. He believes in giving everyone more than one chance...but that's beside the point. Do you know how Harry survived that Halloween?"

Ginny nodded. "His mother sacrificed herself for him," she said quietly. Daphne nodded shortly, but Ginny could see the pain in her eyes. She took a deep breath.

"Yes, but that isn't all. Lily loved Harry, as only a mother could love her son. She was also a superbly talented Charms witch, far beyond me in some areas. She managed to perform so-called Old Magic, both non-verbally and without arousing the suspicions of Voldemort." Ginny jumped, but Daphne ignored it; she was staring off into space now. Ginny tried to meet her eyes, but she avoided her gaze, almost involuntarily. *Wait, what was it that Harry said about Daphne not looking him in the eyes when she was talking about his mum? But I don't have green eyes...the hair! I guess my hair looks like Lily's...*

"Yes," Daphne said, answering the unspoken question.

Ginny frowned. "I didn't say that aloud."

"I know you didn't, but you were broadcasting it all over the place, and my senses are heightened from the training. It's also how I knew you were here. I can sense Magical Auras; it's a family talent. It's very useful for dueling; I tell when someone is sneaking up behind me."

Ginny nodded, that made sense. "I'm sorry," she said shyly. "...maybe I should leave..."

"*No!* Stay. I mean...if you want to of course..." Daphne said trailing off. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Ginny said. It certainly felt strange to be a source of comfort for a woman over twenty years old than her. But she was finding out a lot of things she didn't know, and it seemed to be helping Daphne.

"I'm sorry, I really am. It's just so strange...Hermione reminds me the most of Lily, at least in terms of her personality. But you...I don't know, I just could have sworn I was talking to her...Merlin, I shouldn't be doing this...these are my problems, not yours," she said as calmly as she could manage.

"It's okay, it really is. I'm sure you miss her..."

"I do. Merlin I do. I'm just glad that I have Harry...and that Harry has me..."

Ginny was, to put it bluntly, utterly shocked that Daphne had still managed to hold on to her composure. *Mum would have broken down ten minutes ago...*

"She probably would have...Damn! I shouldn't do that. I need to take a nap or something, it's like you are saying what you are thinking in my ear."

Ginny frowned. "Would you like me to get Harry?"

Daphne shook her head. "I'll be fine. Really, I will. I've dealt with it this long...why don't you go see what they're up to?"

"Okay," Ginny said, turning to go.

"Thank you," Daphne said, a true smile breaking through her tearing eyes. "Thank you Ginny."

"No problem," Ginny replied weakly, before she left the room. She could have sworn she heard a loud sob the moment that she exited.

"I've dealt with it this long..."

You shouldn't have had to.

As Ginny pushed the door open to where Harry and Tonks were practicing, she was greeted by a rather strange sight.

Indeed, her first impression as she entered the room was that somehow, her brother Ron had ended up at Dressler Manor (and wasn't red-faced and screaming). For standing next to Tonks, complete with red hair, freckles, and blue eyes, was...

"Harry?"

Tonks burst out laughing, while Harry smirked. "Now, if only your brother had my brains..."

Ginny giggled. "I can't believe it! You look just like him! How did you get the freckles?"

Harry closed his eyes, and with a small 'pop' of magic, his hair was black and unruly, his eyes emerald green, and his face unblemished. He shrugged to answer her earlier question. "Just focused, I suppose."

"I'd say so," Tonks said, almost in awe of his accomplishment. She suddenly pulled him into a hug, despite his protests. Then, being Tonks, she proceeded to pull him into headlock and mash her fist against his head, bouncing his entire body up and down in the process. *I wonder if she was this rough on Charlie*, Ginny thought bemusedly. Bill and Charlie were always wrestling as kids, but Tonks had a definite size advantage on the much smaller boy.

"Tonks, stop it," Ginny found herself protesting on her friend's behalf. "He's got no chance against you, and you've bruised him enough for one day."

“Oh alright,” she said reluctantly, and released her hold on him. Harry got to his feet, brushing off his robes, and glaring at the girl that fancied herself as his older sister.

“Thanks Ginny,” he muttered under his breath.

Tonks suddenly looked thoughtful, before grinning evilly. “So, Harry,” she began in a voice that could only lead to a rather embarrassing question for all parties. Harry closed his eyes. “Does Hermione know that you’re cheating on her? After all, bringing a girl to your house is kind of a tip off, is it not?”

A bright blush appeared on Harry’s eyes, though it was drowned out by the exasperated expression on Harry’s face. “*Tonks...*” he groaned.

“Does she?” Tonks persisted. Ginny’s cheeks were the color of her hair now.

“Yes, Tonks,” Harry replied exasperatedly. “Hermione knows *everything*.” Harry gave Ginny a sympathetic look.

“**TONKS!**” Ginny cried.

“...*Harry...*”

“...*Harry...Harry...Tonks is trying to break the door down...*”

“**HARRY!**”

Harry jerked awake and sat up in a flash, so fast that his forehead connected with Ginny’s temple, sending both of them reeling backwards, howling. There was a crash as Tonks finally got through the doors.

“WAKE UP YOU SLEEPYHEAD! IT’S CHRISTMAS!” Tonks bellowed loud enough to wake the dead.

Harry started again, then rubbed the sleep from his eyes pulled his feet onto the floor.

“Tonks, seriously. Can you act your age just once...*and don't hex me!*” Harry yelled, pulling his wand out of his wrist holster.

Tonks crossed her arms. She was sporting short red hair and green eyes in the Christmas spirit. Harry loved his Metamorphic abilities, but unlike Tonks, he actually had shame. He wasn't going to vocalize that, of course. “I'm coming you crazy wench.”

“You couldn't stop me anyway, Harry,” she replied in a sing-song voice. “You aren't allowed to use magic during the holidays. I'm just letting you off.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “As if the Ministry could detect my magic through the wards?”

“Damn you and your education,” Tonks mumbled. “Come on!” She grabbed Harry by the shirt sleeve and began pulling him out of the room. He fought her off and headed downstairs.

“I take it that you got me something?” Harry asked as they descended. Ginny was hanging back, and had ducked her head. Obviously, she hadn't gotten anything. “Hang on a second, Tonks.”

“Oh fine, but you...oh,” she said as she saw him approach Ginny.

“Ginny?”

“I'm sorry, Harry. I just didn't have any money and didn't have time to make something and didn't think and...”

“Ginny?”

“Yes?”

“Shut up. Please. Just you being here is enough of a gift,” Harry said honestly. “You've had fun, haven't you?”

“More fun than I would have had at Hogwarts,” she admitted with a smile. “It's been great!”

Harry smiled at her enthusiasm, and hoped he'd cheered her up. "Hermione's coming tomorrow, she'll stay with us for the rest of vacation. It's a female invasion I tell you!" he cried.

Ginny giggled. "We will have numbers on you. Still, I don't think that any of us are exactly the kind of girls that you can't stand."

"I'll second that," Harry replied with a grin. "Come on, let's see what Tonks is trying to drag me down the stairs for."

When they got downstairs, Tonks had already sorted her gifts into a pile. Andromeda and Daphne were sitting in armchairs around a roaring fire. "Finally!" Tonks cried exasperatedly. Andromeda buried her head in her hands.

Harry immediately attacked his gifts, giving in to sheer curiosity. The first he opened was a lumpy package. He cleared away the paper, and revealed a dark green sweater with a blue 'H.' He stared curiously at it, then checked the note.

To Harry

Thank you for taking care of my daughter,

Love,

Molly Weasley

He stared for a moment, blinking. *I barely know the woman...*

"Mum made you a Weasley sweater?" Ginny asked in disbelief. She was currently half-way into putting on her own sweater, which was green with a pink 'G.'

"I guess she did," Harry said distantly. He wasn't sure why she had, but he certainly appreciated the gesture. "Can you remember to thank her next time you see her?"

Ginny nodded. "What have you got there, Harry?" Tonks asked. Daphne also peered over, and a smile lit her features. She probably had had something to do with it.

“Awesome. Now open my gift, you stupid lout!”

“Alright, alright...*crazy wench*,” Harry mumbled. He yanked out a package wrapped in, of all things, hideous purple wrapping paper with pink stripes. “Nice wrapping paper, Tonks.”

“Stop complaining and open it!” she yelled at him.

He did so, revealing...a mirror. “Tonks, I thought we had this conversation. My appearance isn’t *that* bad!”

Tonks groaned. “It’s a little more than that. Think of something you’d like to change into. Harry imagined Tonks’ pink hair, and suddenly his reflection had it. But his hair hadn’t actually changed. A slow grin made its way onto his face.

“This is bloody brilliant, Tonks,” Harry said.

“Thought you’d like it!” Tonks cried. “I want to hear that you are practicing everyday, y’hear!”

“Open yours,” Harry implored her. Tonks needed no encouraging, and ripped it open. Harry and Daphne both grinned at her gasp of surprise. “An Aurorwrist holster!...and what’s this...*My favorite big sister – Harry...oh you...!*”

Tonks, tears in her eyes, dove for him, but he scooted out of the way. Tonks’ methods of showing affection tended to be a bit...rough.

“C’mon Harry, show your big sis some love, would you?” Tonks’s voice had a strange tenor in it, and Harry was shocked to see that she was on the verge of crying. *I guess that really meant a lot to her...*

Harry ran over and ran into her arms. She hugged him tightly...then proceeded to put him in a headlock and shove him to the ground. Introduced to the floor for the fourth time in two days, Harry sighed as Tonks began lightly banging his head on the floor, whispering words of thanks.

“Tonks, I’ll accept all of your thanks if you *give me the use of my body back!*”

Tonks let him go, hugged him, and ran off, leaving Harry extremely confused. Andromeda was beaming. Harry shook his head. He understood that Tonks was lonely, but still, this seemed a bit...extreme.

“Harry you stupid git!” Ginny yelled. At his clueless look she groaned. “Ugh. Boys.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Harry demanded. “And you haven’t opened my present yet.”

“Present? What pre...oh...” She ripped it open, and frowned in confusion. “What..?”

“The wizarding edition of the *Chronicles of Narnia*,” Harry explained. “It was written by a squib, and released mostly to Muggles. There are all kinds of footnotes in there explaining how accurate what he wrote was and also explaining about various animals and such.”

“You’ll love it, Ginny,” Daphne assured her. “Harry loved those books as a child.” Ginny nodded, frowning.

“Why..?”

“Because you’ve probably never touched Muggle literature, which this is to a large degree. I couldn’t think of anything else to get you. There’s a whole series if you like it. They’re great, trust me.”

“Okay,” Ginny said, her face breaking into a wide smile. “Thank you,” she said, racing forward and giving Harry a small hug, which he returned warmly. For the first time, she didn’t feel her cheeks warm as she pulled away.

“You’ve got three more to open, Harry,” Daphne said, indicating the parcels on the floor. He ripped open Hermione’s to reveal *A Comprehensive Biography of Salazar Slytherin*. Daphne nodded appreciatively.

“Good choice, I’ve read it myself; excellent reference. I assume that’s about the Parseltongue?” Harry nodded. On Snape’s advice, he’d owed her about his newfound talent.

Harry set Hermione’s gift aside and opened one wrapped in brown paper. It revealed a large plate of all kinds of baked goods...from Hagrid. Harry grimaced. “Daphne, do you know any spells that will make rock cakes edible?”

“Sorry?...oh, Hagrid. Well, I could try simple warming charms, that *might* work,” she suggested, taking the plate from him and setting it aside. She gazed intently at his last gift, a small box wrapped in blue. Harry opened it, and flipped open the lid of the gift box. Daphne heard an intake of breath.

“Have you noticed the ring I’ve been wearing lately, Harry? On my left hand?” Harry nodded, he’d been used to Daphne only wearing her wedding ring. The new ring was gold, but with a kind of blue sheen around it, and was engraved with the image of a falcon carrying a snake.

“That’s the other one,” she explained. “As mates, they’ll both of us to sense when the other is in danger. The ring will burn. They’ll also give both of us the sense of a presence in our subconscious, though we won’t be able to actually communicate. It’s an O’Connor family heirloom, one of the only ones left,” she explained. Harry instantly saw the benefits of such a piece of jewelry. While Harry couldn’t Apparate, Daphne could, and would be able to come to his aid in minutes.

“Thanks,” Harry said, running up and giving his surrogate mother a hug. Daphne pulled him into her arms, squeezing him tightly, but gently, as if she never wanted to let go.

“You’re welcome Harry,” she said, a few tears glistening in her eyes. “I just wish...”

“I know,” Harry said quietly. “You couldn’t have done anything,” he told her. “You would have died, and I’d be living with my aunt. We’d both be worse off.”

She nodded at his logic, and smiled. "That's my Harry," she said proudly.

Ginny watched the scene between mother and child and felt tears run down her cheeks. She glanced over, and saw that even the normally unflappable Andromeda looked on the verge of breaking down. Ginny silently turned around, and she and Andromeda vacated the room.

"*Hermione!*" Ginny squealed happily, as her bushy-haired best friend stepped over the threshold into the entrance hall of Dressler Manor. Harry was leaning casually against the banister of the main staircase, beaming widely, Tonks standing behind him, a devious look on her face as she planned a way to embarrass her 'ickle brother.'

"How have you all been?" Hermione asked, giving Ginny a hug. The Grangers stepped through, followed by Daphne, who had obviously let them through the wards. They stepped to the side and began talking. It looked like Daphne was assuring them that everything would be perfect for their daughter's stay.

"Harry!" she cried, rushing up to him and giving him a tight hug, which he returned. Tonks snickered evilly in the background.

As Hermione turned to the girl, her beaming smile suddenly became a bit...devious, a rather strange look on the Muggleborn bookworm. "Hello Tonks," she said brightly.

"Wotcher Hermione," Tonks replied. "Don't worry, I've kept these two in line...Harry's got the bruises to prove it."

"I hope you weren't *too* hard on him," Hermione said, placing her hand on her hips.

"OI!" Harry protested. "Are you saying you *condone* the physical and verbal abuse I've had to endure in a week with this terror?"

Tonks' eyes narrowed. "*You'll pay for that,*" she whispered dangerously.

"You do realize that if you make me 'pay for that' that you are just proving me right?" Harry asked her. "You can't deny that you are a bloody terror at times!"

Tonks looked thoughtful, then put on a grin. "But you still love me, right?"

"Of course..." she said, yanking him into an oxygen-depriving embrace. "...Ickle Harrikins!"

Harry spluttered. "Damn you woman!" he cried. Tonks crossed her arms and smirked.

"All right, that's enough. Harry doesn't have a chance against you," Daphne said.

"You'll be alright, sweetheart?" Jane Granger asked.

"I'll be fine Mum!" Hermione cried down to her.

"Take care of yourself, Hermione," her father added. They left after conversing briefly with Daphne.

"So, do you want me to show me to my room?" Hermione asked. Tonks levitated her things, while Harry showed her to the room they'd had the House-Elves clean out recently.

The next week passed rather uneventfully. Ginny sent a note to her family, both at the Burrow and at Hogwarts, expressing how much she missed them, that she was having a great time, and also thanking her mother for the two sweaters. Harry personally had been very touched by the gesture. He barely knew the woman, and she'd put a lot of time it making her a very nice and warm sweater. He liked the choice of color too. Green for Slytherin, blue for his Ravenclaw guardian. Or perhaps Molly Weasley simply thought the colors mixed well.

Either way, he hoped to get a chance to thank her personally at some point.

Hermione had, predictably, buried herself in the Dressler Family Library. The referencing system, along with the number of controversial (such as goblin and house-elf rights) and Restricted titles, gave her access to much more information than she could have accessed at Hogwarts. The latter, she used simply to look up spells that while considered unfit for use by 2nd Years, but were perfectly legal, and useful. Overall, the school was very conservative when it came to restricting library books.

Daphne said that she would go through the library, and create a list of spells she wanted to begin working with Harry on, but in the meantime, he should perfect what he already knew. She said it provide a much needed reference, especially when it came to higher levels of Shielding Spells.

Ginny and Tonks spent a lot of time together, mostly talking about pranks and pranking methods (Tonks had been able to experience the first two of years of Fred and George Weasley's Reign of Terror). Harry had been spending so more time with his first friend, mostly helping her out with her research.

"So what exactly are you looking for here?" Harry asked for the umpteenth time.

"I've told you already!" she cried. "I'm trying to find records of legislation that had Bound creatures to servitude of wizards!"

Harry sighed. "You aren't going to find anything. Like I said, the Dark Ages was limited to wizards. Most of the records from the Classical Era were lost. Even at the time they were written, because there was no magical government, they were more or less agreements between the leaders of certain parts of Europe. There is evidence suggesting a wide scale leadership meeting at about 200 AD, but nothing remains from that time. Even magic couldn't turn back the Barbarians that sacked Rome. Especially because most wizards had little or no training outside of apprenticeships."

Hermione blinked. "How do you remember all of that?"

"How do you sound like you swallowed a textbook?" Harry countered. "Long hours of study; Daphne wouldn't let me begin to learn spells,

but I wanted to learn *something* about the magical world. She didn't spoil me, but she told me anything she could and wouldn't hesitate to get me reading materials. That said, I still find Binns's classes horrifically boring."

"I suppose that makes sense...and I agree about Binns, by the way," she said. "I just can't believe that there is *nothing!* Maybe at Flourish and Blotts..."

"No chance," Harry said, cutting off her question. "Most of the books on the subject aren't sold at public venues. Pretty much anything that paints magical creatures as anything other than beneath wizards, and bound to serve them, is considered controversial. That book on Goblins I found? That's a *very* rare exception."

"It's just so...so *stupid!*" she cried.

Harry nodded. "It is, but we're kids. What are we to do about it?"

Chapter 14: Conversations with the Headmaster

"Take care of yourself, Harry," Daphne called from the platform.

"I will!" he called back, waving.

"There had better be something left of you to torment, Harry!" Tonks yelled, her priorities clear.

"I wouldn't let you down Nymmy!" Harry yelled, before shutting the window as Tonks began ranting about being called *that* name. He chuckled as he sat back down. Ginny was sitting in the opposite corner, sort of staring into space, while Hermione was sitting on the opposite seat, her knees propped up, a book in her lap.

Harry leaned back and tried to relax as the train began to move. He wasn't worried about his return, of course; he was more concerned about what the backlash would be from Ginny staying at Dressler Manor.

Especially because Ginny had made the rather grievous mistake of mentioning to Ron that she'd 'rather stay in a comfortable bed at Dressler Manor than in an empty Gryffindor Tower because you pity me.' Ron, along with most of the Weasleys, was very aware that his family didn't have much money.

Thus, Ginny implying that she preferred to stay in a family manor, when the Weasleys lived in a house supported only by magic was not taken well. No matter how unintentional her implication may have been. They had a loud shouting match that Harry somehow hadn't found out about. She'd only admitted it to him and Hermione when Harry asked her what was wrong three times.

As a result of all of that, Ginny was sitting in the corner with her knees pulled up to her chest, staring blankly out the window. Harry scooted over and placed a hand on her shoulder, and she started.

"Ginny, it'll be okay. I don't think Fred or George resents you for it," he tried to reassure her.

"Maybe," Ginny said vacantly, "though if I know Ron, he told them all about what I said. They'll probably think I'm sucking up to you because you're wealthy," she said bitterly.

"I doubt that," Harry said. "Fred and George are much smarter than that. They won't think you've abandoned them." He squeezed her shoulder, and she looked up at him, surprised.

"I suppose," she admitted. "I just...I just wish Ron would grow up...that he'd be...I dunno, more like you..."

Harry smiled as best he could. Internally, he was still seething with the moronic Gryffindor for an entire list of grievances. "Ron's capable of being a good person, he's just very tactless and immature."

Ginny smiled at that, and she and Harry continued to discuss lighter topics for the remainder of the train ride, with Hermione piping in occasionally, once fully joining the conversation. Of course, that was brief conversation about advanced Transfiguration, which Hermione was able to provide some background on. Currently, she was reading a book on Ancient Runes, a course that they could take as an elective the next year.

Harry hadn't really thought about his courses, but three classes caught his fancy: Arithmacy, Ancient Runes, and Care of Magical Creatures. Daphne said that Ancient Runes was extremely useful, and Arithmacy was a good skill to have. She wasn't averse to magical creatures either, though she preferred the variety that interacted with humans, such as Goblins and Elves, both House-Elves, and rather rare Forest Elves.

Forest Elves had been nearly driven into extinction centuries ago. While they were extremely long-lived, they had never had the need to develop defensive magic, and when their villages had been discovered, hundreds of the rare creatures had been killed. The remainder now lived in the north of the country, protected by Ancient Magic that kept them hidden from all.

It was just more information he'd picked up on from his friends back in Newfoundland. As much fun as they'd had together, it really seemed like their friendship might be coming to an end. Trish had

said that they'd made a number of friends at their school. Of course, Harry still had his own new friends.

Harry smiled as he remembered the events of break. No matter how much Tonks physically abused him, he had to admit he loved the girl as the kind of big sister he'd never had. He just felt so much more relaxed around her, willing to unwind and act his age or below. Maybe it was the mutual camaraderie from being excluded, or both being Metamorphmagi, but either way, he had something with Tonks, and he didn't know if it could ever be duplicated. He'd been surprised by her reaction to his gift in a way, but the more he thought about it, the less surprised he was.

She really had been all alone during a lot of her time at Hogwarts.

They got off the Hogwarts Express at Hogsmeade Station, with Harry checking around the compartment to insure that nothing had been left behind. It was still cold, and as was typical for the area, it was snowing heavily. Hagrid was waiting for them on the platform, and greeted them warmly. They also saw the Deputy Headmistress, Professor McGonagall, who was ensuring that the students quickly got up to the school in the horrid weather. She warmly greeted the trio.

"Hello Harry, how was your break?" she asked in a thick Scottish brogue (A/N: I can't actually remember where I read that, but I love it).

"Very good," Harry replied simply. "How were things here?"

"Quite good, thank you," McGonagall replied. "You'd be amazed how trouble the Weasley twins can cause on their own, but other than that, it was far less chaotic than normal."

Ginny giggled. "What did they do?"

McGonagall blinked, as if she'd just realized that Ginny was there. "Sorry, I'd forgotten you'd been staying with Mister Potter...your brothers suspended Ronald from the chandelier in the Great Hall, charmed the suits of armor to trip anyone that walked by them, and set off fireworks during Christmas Dinner."

Ginny winced. "That's going to mean a Howler."

McGonagall nodded. "Albus seemed to enjoy their...antics, but I am not quite as tolerant of such behavior. I'll trust your mother to deal with them, Heaven knows she's used to it by now...Did you stay with Mister Potter as well, Miss Granger?" she asked of her favorite student.

"For the last week of holidays, ma'am," Hermione replied. "I was visiting with my Muggle relatives before that."

"I see." She turned to Harry. "I've heard rumors that you've befriended Nymphadora Tonks. How is she; she's in the Auror program, correct?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah...she's like an older sister...and no, she hasn't changed *one bit*."

McGonagall gave him a small smile. "I expected as much. A brilliant student, she was, but she lacked...let's just say she 'lacked the ability to behave herself at times.' I believe I put that on her recommendation...she didn't ask me for one, by the way, the Aurors requested it. I only put something like that on it because I knew that *if* she applied herself, she'd be a lock for the program."

Harry nodded. "Best be honest, probably prepared them for her."

McGonagall smiled again. "You three had best be off, I'm going to check the train, ensure that no students are sleeping or anything of that sort."

They said goodbye to their Transfiguration Professor, and boarded one of the carriages. "So Harry, Professor McGonagall seemed rather civil, did she not?" she asked, referring to his comments earlier in the year. Harry had been rather convinced that the Head of Gryffindor House wasn't very fond of him simply because he'd been Sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, where McGonagall had overseen his parents.

"I think she still feels guilty for what happened to us," Harry admitted, referring to how apologetic she had been after Harry and Hermione

had nearly died chasing down the Philosopher's Stone. Earlier, they had brought the threat to the life-sustaining magical treasure to her attention, but she had dismissed it, believing any idea of something protected by Dumbledore being in danger was absurd.

"That may be true," Ginny pointed out. "But she didn't do what she just did out of guilt or commitment. You may have won her over, Harry."

Harry sighed. "I have to wonder how much I *want* to be accepted by her *after* the way she treated me."

Hermione looked scandalized. "*Harry!* How can you say that? She's a teacher, not only that, but a very skilled witch."

Harry bit back a retort and tried to put what she had just said into perspective.

Hermione had been right about one thing; McGonagall was a powerful and wise witch, and also a natural leader. She'd been by Albus Dumbledore's side throughout the First War, and her association with him dated to when she fought with him as a student against Grindelwald. It would be useful to have such an important person think favorably of him. And also, in the more personal sense, her interest in his well-being seemed sincere. She probably had been ashamed of her treatment of him, and certainly hadn't been repeating it this year. Yet, she'd managed to live up to her reputation of being strict but fair, and that was the way Harry preferred it. One day, he might need to draw attention to himself. For now, it was best if he simply stayed out of the limelight. The element of surprise was always important; something he had learned from both Daphne and from his study of wizarding and Muggle history.

He blinked, surprised that he was thinking in such a military sense, almost as if there was already a war going on. He was twelve, not twenty; a student, not a soldier. He needn't burden himself with such things; Daphne had taught him that. He tried to refocus on the much lighter conversation going on between his two best friends.

They walked up the path to the Entrance Hall, where they saw Fred and George being yelled at by Percy, as the twins ignored the scolding and made faces at the Gryffindor Prefect, while Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnett watched with amusement.

Ginny approached rather nervously, but Fred and George had wide grins on their face. "Oi! Ickle Ginnikins is back!" Fred cried.

"What?" Percy asked, stopping in mid-rant.

"You know, your *ickle* sister, only female Weasley in generations, scares the pants off us with that Bat-Bogey..."

"Alright, alright, I get the point." Percy turned around. "Hello Ginny, how was break?" His tone was actually quite friendly, and Harry's mood brightened considerably.

"It was fun, how was it here?"

Percy scowled. "It would have been *much better* if these two could take anything seriously," he said, indicating the two buffoons behind him.

"And if you ran the world, our dear Sir Percival-" Fred began.

"-the world would be rather boring," said George.

Percy ignored them. "I'd like to...apologize for how I've treated you, Ginny," he said, faltering a bit. "I'm really rather ashamed of myself..."

Ginny ran forward and wrapped her arms around his middle in a hug. "You're forgiven Perce," she mumbled. She let go, and Percy patted her on the head, before dropping back and leaving quietly, probably still a bit ashamed of his behavior. The eldest Weasley at Hogwarts took proper manners and behavior *very* seriously, and he'd not treated his little sister as family should be treated.

"Aren't you going to say hello, Ronald?" Hermione said from behind them, a tone of cold anger in her voice. Harry looked up to see Ron standing on the stairs, a cold, yet rather petulant expression on his face.

“Hello Ginny,” he said disingenuously.

Ginny ran forward, obviously hoping for the best. Ron backed away from her. “No Ginny!” he yelled angrily. “How could you *abandon* us like that!”

“Ron,” she began, tears beginning to pool in her eyes.

“No! Did you have fun at your little *Manor*? With all the comforts and amenities that *we can’t afford*?” Ron demanded angrily. “Or was it just your little *crush* that made you forget about us?”

Ginny was crying now. She ran down the stairs and ran into Harry. Rather than running past him, she clung to him like a lifeline, a fact that wasn’t lost on Harry. He didn’t know much about girls, but from what he’d seen, they preferred not to cry like this in public. He really wasn’t sure what it meant. Hermione had a look of shock on her face that was quickly replaced by cold anger. Ron ran off as he saw his twin brothers looking absolutely murderous.

Harry gently passed off his sobbing best friend to Hermione, and her expression softened as she tried to calm the redhead. She whispered words of encouragement, and shielded Ginny as they made their way down the dungeons, likely headed for the very bathroom where both Harry and Hermione had nearly died the previous year.

Harry flicked his wrist, and clutching his wand, advanced up the stairs. Without warning, the Weasley twins barred his path.

“Sorry Harry,” George said.

“But this isn’t your job,” Fred continued.

“It’s ours,” they finished together.

Harry nodded. “Do your worst,” he said, meaning it. He was absolutely livid with the idiotic Gryffindor.

“Oh don’t worry,” George said darkly.

“We will.”

Fred and George proceeded to launch a castle-wide sweep for Ron. He wasn't in the Gryffindor Dormitory, the most obvious place. George suggested the Map as Fred closed the sixth broom closet that the twins had magically unlocked. They'd already found a couple snogging, a couple of seventh years that they didn't know. Honestly, couldn't they find a better place than a broom closet?

Using a little help from Padfoot, Moony, Wormtail, and Prongs, they located their brother. He was in an abandoned classroom on the fourth floor. Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan were with him. They made their way to the classroom in question and paused. Through the distorted glass, they could see Ron pacing around while the two other boys stood off the side.

"Oh Ronnie-kins!" George called in a sing-song voice. There was a curse and some shuffling from inside. George unlocked the door and Fred pushed it open.

"You two, clear out," Fred motioned at the door for Dean and Seamus. Exchanging confused looks, they left Ron to the tender mercies of his twins brothers.

"Hello ickle Ronnikins," George began darkly.

"Guys..." Ron began nervously.

"Shut it Ron," Fred snapped. "You just made Ginny cry!"

"I'm sorry!" he protested. "I don't know what-"

"Yeah, yeah, we've been hearing that *all year!*" Ron flinched.

"I think we need to teach you a *little lesson*," George said, raising his wand. Ron backed away, throwing his hands up as if to ward off the bizarre curse or hex that was likely coming. A curse, that, knowing the twins, was likely to cause both discomfort and embarrassment. They found those more effective than mere pain.

"Guys! *Please!* You didn't hear her..." Ron pleaded.

"Hear what? Do you honestly believe that she'd just *give up on us* because we don't have *money*?" George demanded angrily.

"It's pathetic that you think so little of her, Ron," Fred added.

"I'm sorry! Really!" Ron pleaded again.

"Are you really?" Fred asked with a hint of genuine curiosity. "Or are you just saying that? Or are you sorry for what you did, but not *why* you did it?"

"What?" Ron asked, bewildered.

"Ron, there is something you kind of need to understand. We may not be in love with the idea, but Ginny's a Slytherin," George said. Ron opened his mouth, but Fred cut him off.

"Beyond that, she hasn't changed one bit...well, maybe a little, but she certainly hasn't turned into a miniature of Vanessa Fitzpatrick," Fred said, referring to the nasty, foul-tempered, and exceedingly rude Slytherin Fourth Year that had been the target of two of their more recent pranks. They'd turned all of her clothing red and gold, then made her feet swell to the size of watermelons. All with a little help from their dear Marauders, of course...

"Who?"

"Never mind that," Fred snapped. "Point is, she's the same as she's always been. Do you know what that means?"

"But she isn't-"

"It means she was *a/ways* a Slytherin. We thought she was just Ginny, but we were wrong...or really, we just didn't think about it."

"Too true, brother of mine," George commented.

"Thing is Ron-"

"-You've been living with-"

"-Sleeping in the same house with-"

“-even sleeping in the same bed as-“ Fred added with a smirk, referring to the time when five friends of Bill had come for his birthday and they’d had to double up their sleeping arrangement. Of, course what was also memorable about that event...

“-and, don’t forget *wetting* that aforementioned bed...with aforementioned sister in it-“ George added. Ron turned bright red.

“-for eleven years,” they finished together.

“I don’t...”

“George?” Fred asked, turning to his twin.

“Yes Fred?”

“Is there any doubt as to *why* Harry has been completely unable to get through to our dear Ronald?”

“Absolutely not. Using my professional knowledge, I diagnose this as a common case of extreme thickness,” George answered.

They turned back to their brother, who looked like he wanted to dig a hole in the stone floor and tunnel to safety. Fortunately, he wasn’t up to lifting massive stone blocks either.

“What, is *he* your friend now too?” Ron asked, crossing his arms.

Fred turned to George again. “Well?”

“I suppose. He’s taken good care of ickle Ginnikins.”

“And don’t forget he’s friends with Tonks,” Fred added.

“And he’s got a couple of *useful* talents-“

“-Though it’ll be damn difficult to get some dirt on him to put those to use in a noble fashion-“

“-I’d say we could call the little snake a friend,” George concluded.

“Okay...” Ron said, though the reason wasn’t really clear.

“Okay what?”

“Well, I’ll try to be nicer to them...and I’ll apologize to Ginny...” he said. Obviously, he thought he might have a chance to get out of punishment.

“Oh, you aren’t getting off *that* easy,” Fred said, a nasty grin spreading on his face.

“Oh brother of mine, seeing as it’s ickle Ginnikins that we’re dealing with, why not use an *appropriate* punishment...”

“You know the incantation? And you didn’t tell *me*?”

“You think I’d let her be the only one that knows it? And you didn’t ask.”

“Alright, I’ll hang him from the ceiling, you do that Hex from Hell,” Fred concluded.

“Right,” they said together. Ron’s skin was almost translucent.

“Guys...”

“*Levicorpus!*” Fred cried. Ron let out a yell of protest as he was yanked into the air, suspended by his ankle. Fred guided him over to the dusty chandelier on the ceiling of the classroom. “You next.”

“George, *please!*” Ron begged. It looked rather ridiculous seeing as he was currently upside down.

“*Bates Mocos!*”

As Ron began struggling, Fred and George brushed their hands off, cast a Silencing Charm, and left their youngest brother to the tender mercies of his...bogeys...

As it turned out, Ron had been found...eventually.

Actually, according to rumor, he’d been pried off the chandelier by Hagrid after Filch had found him in the wee hours of the morning.

Actually, *he* hadn't found him, he'd followed a couple that had happened upon him while looking for an empty classroom to snog in. Those two had been given detention, though no House points were taken by McGonagall as they had saved a student from a *horrible* fate.

Harry really couldn't imagine a worse death than being sliced up by your bogeys. *Maybe Azkaban...Nope.*

"...so anyway, our *darling* brother hasn't ratted us out yet."

"His health, both mental and physical, is probably depending on that," George finished. Ginny still hadn't stopped laughing, and Harry had only recently recovered the art of coherent speech.

"I'll bet," Harry chuckled.

"Thanks...guys," Ginny said in between laughs. Even Hermione was snorting ever few seconds, unable to get the mental image out of her head. A mental image that probably wasn't that far off.

"So, Ginnikins, what do you think about *our* execution of *your* spell?" George asked pointedly. Ginny sighed.

"I really didn't expect to lose my edge so soon...good thing I've got Harry to teach me a few things...*right, Harry?*" she asked, stressing the question.

"If you can prevent your mum from finding out and attacking me or Daphne for teaching you 'dangerous magic,' then I'm all for it. I just get the idea that it isn't a good idea to be on the bad side of your mother," Harry replied honestly. He didn't know why, but he really did want to make sure that Ginny was capable of protecting herself. *Sometimes I think too much like Daphne...*

"Who's to say we won't tell?" Fred asked smartly.

"Me," Hermione said. "Unless you want Angelina and Alicia knowing a few things of...*compromising* nature."

"What have you got on us?" George demanded, turning to Ginny, who had obviously told her friend.

“Why should I tell you?” Ginny replied.

“Because we’re your brothers...no, wait, we *did* just hang one of our brothers up from the ceiling and Bat-Bogey him, so that’s no good,” George thought aloud.

“That’s right,” Ginny said, smiling evilly. “Mum isn’t very careful with your baby pictures,” she hinted sneakily.

Fred paled. “No. You don’t have...”

“Not here!” George said, whacking his twin on the head. “Do you want everyone to know?”

“Know what?” Harry chipped in.

“None of your business Potter.”

“Well, I think we understand each other then,” Hermione cut in. “Come on, Ginny, Harry, let’s go do some studying.”

Harry turned to his friend. “Time to hit the books then?”

Ginny made a face. “This early?”

Fortunately, a letter decided at that moment to appear in a flash of fire right over Harry’s breakfast. He snatched it out of the air before the twins got any ideas. Stuffing it in his pocket, he shoved a bread roll into his mouth, took a long sip of pumpkin juice, and left the Great Hall with his friends close behind him.

As soon as they’d gotten into the abandoned classroom outside the Great Hall, Harry opened the letter. The first thing he noticed was that the handwriting was identical to the handwriting that had been found on the note that came with his Invisibility Cloak, which was currently stuffed in his robe pocket. Disappearing quickly was a useful ability, especially when Peeves or Filch showed up and Harry was doing something that wasn’t entirely innocent...like carrying a book from the Dressler Family Library that would have been in the Restricted Section faster than one could say ‘banned.’ The Ministry wasn’t fond

of literature being available to students that explained how to use a spell that could decapitate someone (The Severing Curse).

Harry,

You've been here for a year and a half already; oh, how time flies.

I would greatly appreciate if we might have a small talk tonight at 8 o'clock in my office. I assure you that you are not in trouble, I simply wish to have a discussion with you about a few things. I'd like to know one of the best students in this school a bit better. And I have cleared it with your guardian, by the way.

I'll expect you in my office, though I may be a bit late. One can never underestimate the number of emergencies they will have to deal with. Such is life.

Albus Dumbledore

P.S. The password is 'blood pops.' I entertained a vampire recently, and received a large stash of them. I'm not entirely sure what to do with them, though.

"Let's see...flattery, telling me I'm safe, telling me that Daphne said it was alright...and what could be construed as an attempt at humor. Methinks he wants me for a bit more than a little chat over tea," Harry concluded.

Hermione frowned. "Perhaps we should go with you?"

"No," Harry said firmly. "I trust Dumbledore to an extent, but he's a Legillimens and Daphne says he sometimes lets his curiosity get the better of him. I can detect his intrusions, you can't. Besides, as important as you two are to me, I need to do this alone. I'm not in any danger, unless I and the entire wizarding world has been thoroughly deceived by Dumbledore."

Ginny looked anxious, but nodded. Hermione was still frowning. "Why? Why now?"

Harry shrugged. "I dunno. It's almost certain he knows about our training, so that's not it. He probably *does* want to know me, though probably not because I'm one of the top students in the school. Otherwise, you'd be going before me," he said to Hermione, who blushed at the praise.

"I'm worried," Hermione admitted. At his questioning look, she added, "Not about Dumbledore, mind, but the timing..."

"There hadn't been an attack in over a month. There have only been two total," Harry pointed out. "He's certainly taking his time if he thinks I'm the Heir of Slytherin or something."

"Don't say that!" Hermione and Ginny yelled simultaneously, then looked at each other. Harry frowned.

"Why?"

"I don't...I don't know," Ginny admitted. "It's just...you've been such a good friend, and to imagine you that evil just...just scares me." Harry nodded. Her worst fear had to be Ron's stupid rumors actually being true.

"The same for me," Hermione admitted sheepishly. "I know you aren't, mind, but the thought..."

Harry nodded. "I understand. I...I'd probably feel the same way if it was one of you two.

Harry departed the Slytherin Common Room at 7:30, when the Prefects were beginning to round up students and send them to their dormitories. Harry wasn't entirely sure why the Hogwarts student curfew was so early, but it wasn't as if he was making the decisions. He'd normally just stay up to about eleven reading. He was currently halfway through the Goblin book that Daphne had recommended. He'd easily learned more about the clever and powerful, if unsightly, magical creatures than he had in all of Binns classes and what he could find in Flourish and Blotts combined.

Goblins were extraordinarily important, more so than any cared to believe. Most thought of them as contemptible creatures who existed only because of greed and vindictiveness.

They were wrong, almost unforgivably so. Goblins had existed as long as wizards, and while wizards had been unorganized at best before going through the Dark Ages, the goblins had, in secret, formed a workable government and civilization underneath the surface of Northern England. They'd made their presence known in 1212, perhaps a large mistake, as the Norman wizards of William the Conqueror had attempted to enslave them and capture their magic. The result was a series of bloody goblin rebellions for centuries until the agreement that gave goblins autonomy and ownership of Gringotts.

Men may win wars, but money saves nations. And this is a nation that may need saving before its all over.

"Potter!" a silky voice snapped.

Harry turned around to face his Head of House. "Yes, Professor?"

"Don't play innocent with me. Where are you going?" he demanded, stepping out from the shadows.

Harry was unfazed. "Dumbledore has asked to see me. I'm obliging his request."

Snape frowned. "Why?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "If I could..."

"Fine, Potter. I'll expect you back in an hour or so."

Harry nodded and set off for Dumbledore's office. He donned his Invisibility Cloak and cast Silencing Charms to avoid Filch. While he wouldn't get in trouble, as he could certainly get let off by the Headmaster, he'd rather avoid having the deal with the vindictive Squib. Daphne said he hadn't been any better when they'd been going to school. He'd actually been new at that point, and had been given the job by Dumbledore as a favor to his father, a classmate of

Dumbledore's at Hogwarts. Filch wasn't his actual last name; he'd changed it at seventeen out of his shame at being born without magic. Somehow, that shame had turned to bitterness.

Filch had also been even more irritable since his familiar had been attacked.

Harry didn't encounter anyone, and walked up to the Gargoyle. "Hello Frederick," Harry said, remembering the time Daphne had convinced the statue to let her into Dumbledore's office. The stone gargoyle moved at the name, the stone warping as it stretched and shook its head. Its mouth moved.

"Hello Harry Potter," a voice said. Harry gave the magical statue an appraising look.

"Didn't know you could do that," Harry admitted. "Is Dumbledore in?"

"No, he is not at the moment. However, he instructed me to keep the door unlocked for you. He should be back in a short time. Would you like to enter?"

The voice was gravelly, like one would expect the voice of a stone statue to be...if statues spoke on a regular basis. There was also a tone of experience and power.

"Indeed, I have been here a long time."

"I would like to enter now," Harry said. "Blood pops."

"Ah, Albus changed the password before he left, but as he instructed, you may enter."

With the quiet grind of stone on stone, the platform the gargoyle occupied began to spin, descending into the floor until a stone block filled the hole seamlessly. Harry stepped over the new floor and into a small chamber with a spiral staircase. The gargoyle returned behind him, and he climbed the staircase. At the top, the magnificent oak door was open. He stepped into Dumbledore's office.

Harry looked around, taking in the myriad of objects and devices around the large space. Above the office space itself was what appeared to be a private library, though Harry could see no stairs to reach the upper floor, and suspected the entrance was hidden. Harry scanned the room. He'd been frightened and anxious the first time he'd been here, and hadn't taken in much except the people occupying the office.

Various magical devices and instruments were found all over the office, placed on tables, shelves, even in the wall itself. Small bookcases lined the walls, on top of which were more silver instruments of varying purposes. Harry recognized a few, such as a Magical Aura Tracker, which could detect the location of an unsuspecting wizard anywhere in the world. Unsuspecting being the key; it was easy enough to shield one's magical aura from a long-distance tracking device. He saw an ornate Foe Glass on one wall.

Besides the desk, which had a number of instruments on it that were exuding blue and green light, and an inkwell and parchment, Harry noticed one more thing of note. In the center of the floor in an alcove on the right of the office was a perch for a large bird. Currently occupying the perch was a creature Harry had only read about. A magnificent bird, covered in red and gold plumage with dark eyes. It was about the size of a turkey.

Of course, a gorgeous and rare phoenix such as the one currently resting, its head under its wing, on a perch in Dumbledore's office was far more remarkable than a bird that American Muggles consumed on a holiday they called 'Thanksgiving.'

Harry approached the bird, and as he expected, it lifted its head from its wing and stared at him. Harry stared back, not blinking. The phoenix let out a trill.

Harry *flinched*.

He blinked, confused. He knew a bit about phoenixes, of course, they were perhaps Tanner's favorite magical creature, next to Hippogriffs. He knew that their tears had healing powers, that they could carry heavy loads hundreds of times heavier than themselves, that they were immortal, burning up in fire only to be reborn from the ashes...

He also knew that their song was nothing ordinary. That it gave strength and confidence to the Light...and hesitation and fear to the Dark.

I suppose it's to be expected, Harry reasoned. With all that's happened to me in my life, I mean...I've been hit with five Unforgivables before I turned twelve. It's only logical that they would have left some kind of...trace, a mark on my soul and my magic. A kind of blot that sinks deeply...and never comes out.

The bird trilled again. Harry did not flinch, instead, he suddenly felt lighter, as if a weight had been lifted from him. Curious, he approached the phoenix, extending a hand without thinking. The creature hopped off the perch and onto his outstretched arm, careful not to break the skin with its sharp talons. Harry felt warmth fill him, and also a sense of familiarity, strangely enough. As if he'd been in close contact with this majestic bird before. He certainly couldn't remember it, though he supposed it was possible he had seen it before. He would guess he'd remember meeting such a rare creature.

"I wonder what your name is," Harry muttered. To his surprise, a soft voice spoke in his mind.

"Fawkes."

Harry blinked. He definitely had *not* imagined that. He'd just been spoken to mentally by a phoenix. He'd heard about that before, but it never occurred outside of the person that the phoenix was bonded to. Undoubtedly, Fawkes was bonded to Dumbledore, and likely had been for some time. Harry reached out with his free hand and stroked Fawkes' plumage. The feathers were soft, and warm. As a creature of fire, the latter was to be expected.

"I see you've become acquainted with Fawkes, Harry," Dumbledore spoke from somewhere behind him.

Harry didn't even blink at the sudden appearance of his Headmaster. He suspected the man was capable of becoming invisible and silent, likely meaning that the old wizard had Demiguise ancestry. It was unusual, but not unheard of. He'd suspected it ever since Dumbledore had somehow managed to observe him as he sat in

front of the Mirror of Erised without Harry sensing him. Harry didn't have the ability to sense auras as Daphne, the Sole Remaining Member and Magical Heiress of the defunct O'Connor Family did, but he was very difficult to surprise. He really wasn't certain of the reason for that. It was a useful skill to have, regardless.

"Hello Professor," Harry said, turning around. Dumbledore was staring curiously, his blue eyes peeking through his half-moon spectacles at Fawkes, who remained perched on Harry's right arm.

"I must admit that I am surprised, Harry," Dumbledore said, inclining his head, as if he wasn't tall enough already. "Fawkes is not normally so trusting."

Harry thought briefly of telling him how he'd flinched at the phoenix song, but thought better of it. However, Fawkes trilled a low, sad note. Dumbledore's brow furrowed in confusion, and must have garnered something from the sound, as he muttered. "...interesting...I wouldn't have expected that..."

"Pardon me, sir," Harry asked politely.

"Nothing of consequence, I assure you, Harry," he said quietly, moving to sit at the chair behind his desk. Harry knew he was lying, but decided to play along. A wave of his hand and a tray with tea appeared. "If you would, Harry," he said politely, gesturing at the chair in front of his desk. Fawkes took flight, making one loop around the room before settling back on his perch, watching the proceedings. Harry sat.

"Fascinating creatures, phoenixes," he said in a mysterious voice.

"I'm aware, sir," Harry said. "I had a friend back in Newfoundland who spoke often of their abilities. Fascinating would be the right word to describe them."

"Indeed...but that is not what we are here to speak about," the old wizard said. "I wish to get to know you better, Harry."

Harry didn't react noticeably, though his eyes probably narrowed a bit. "Of course, sir," he replied politely. "What is it you'd like to know?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "Straight to the point, aren't you Harry? Just like Daphne."

Harry met his gaze, letting no emotion show. He wanted to impress Dumbledore, at the same time demonstrating that he was not a trusting child who would play his games. Dumbledore was one of the greatest wizards in history and purely of the Light, but he had a reputation, as most Sorcerers of his stature did, of manipulating lesser people to accomplish his goals. Harry wasn't going to be a pawn, but he was going to show him the respect he deserved. Dumbledore had earned that.

"I like to believe that. She's a fine role model." Harry was interested to see that Dumbledore's gaze flickered a little, but the man had far more practice in holding down his emotions than the twelve-year old sitting in front of him did.

"Perhaps we have gotten off on the wrong foot. It would be ideal if you could relax, Harry. I daresay that if I do anything, I'll be hearing from your guardian. I would like to avoid that."

Harry didn't like to hide behind Daphne like that, but he took what he got. "Sorry, sir," he said, trying to force himself to sound more casual. Dumbledore wanted some information, yes, but it seemed as if he did actually care about Harry's well-being and happiness.

"It's quite alright, Harry. Lemon drop?" he asked, holding out a small basket of the yellow sweets. Harry took one and popped it in his mouth.

"I hope for your sake they aren't laced with anything," Harry said lightly.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Even an old man such as myself isn't that foolish," he said, popping two into his own mouth. "I have a bit of a sweet tooth, to be perfectly honest."

Harry smiled, trying to relax. Then he felt a light touch upon his mind. It wasn't an attempt at mental penetration, nor was it repeated. It was probably just Dumbledore's curiosity getting away from him.

Harry gave him a meaningful look. "I apologize, Harry, I should have realized you wouldn't appreciate that. Forgive an old man for his curiosity." Harry nodded, though he didn't fully believe that.

"So, it seems you have found companionship after all," he began. "I must say, I quite like Miss Granger and Miss Weasley." *Interesting. He calls me by my first name, because he's talking to me, but he refers to those who aren't present by their surnames.*

"They've been good friends, sir," Harry said, a bit of a smile forcing its way into his neutral expression. "More than I could have hoped for."

"I'm glad, Harry," Dumbledore said, and Harry could hear the sincerity in his voice. "I feared what might become of you after I found you in front of the Mirror of Erised," he explained, his tone grave.

"I never properly thanked you for that," Harry admitted. He'd done some research into the Mirror, and been rather frightened at how close he had come to possibly losing his sanity. His desperation had been easy fodder for the Mirror's pull.

"No thanks are necessary, Harry. After all, it was I who left it where a student could find it."

"What has become of it?" Harry asked curiously.

Dumbledore frowned. "It has been hidden away, in a remote and safe place." Harry nodded.

"Why did you ask me here tonight?" Harry finally asked, vocalizing the question he'd had since he received the letter.

Dumbledore leaned forward a bit. "I must admit that you *are* rather important to me, Harry. Not merely as the only survivor of the Killing Curse, but as the son of two of my favorite pupils. And the ward of another."

Harry nodded. "I suppose that makes sense, but I'm not really sure where to begin. You know enough about my childhood."

"Yes, I do," he said. "And I must admit that at this moment, I am grateful that Daphne took you away. You have emerged better from it than I could have imagined. You are very mature, Harry, and very observant. I daresay I sometimes forget that I'm talking to a twelve-year old."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Harry said, taking a sip of his tea. "Though I suspect there is more to it than that."

Dumbledore gave him a calculating look, touched with a bit of concern. "Indeed, that is always possible."

"Of course."

"So, how has your training been going?" he asked abruptly. There was no sign in his tone that indicated that Harry was in trouble, only the same curiosity that he'd heard throughout this conversation.

Harry didn't bat an eyelash. "As well as to be expected," he admitted. "I've trained myself far beyond what a student of my age should normally be capable of. I know curses and spells far beyond my own level, though I don't believe I'll get much further until my magic matures."

"Indeed," Dumbledore said. "Many pureblood families train their children in magic from a young age, starting the clock early, as it were. Daphne chose to shield you from that. I believe that was a wise choice."

"I think so," Harry said. "It would be nice to be capable of more, but I loved my childhood. Things were just...much simpler."

"Of course," Dumbledore agreed. "A life without magic is in many ways a much simpler life. Though I would never make that choice. I daresay I've become a bit lazy."

Harry chuckled briefly at the humor, then smiled. "I agree with that, and I haven't even learned wandless spellcasting."

Dumbledore gave him a small smile. "It is a rare gift, especially to the point where one can cast complicated spells without the use of a

wand. Mostly, it is limited to only the most powerful. I wouldn't give up hope though, Harry. I believe you have a great deal of potential."

"Thank you sir."

"So, besides yourself, how are your friends progressing?"

"Well, Hermione had a head start on Ginny, so she's got an edge. She isn't quite as good as me, though she's developing an aptitude for fire and light related spells. They tend to carry more power and magical intensity." Harry had noticed that Hermione had begun to use the Burning Hex often, and had been reading up on fire-related spells.

"Interesting. It isn't unusual that a witch or wizard will specialize in a given area. Lily was quite good at Charms, of course, and James excellent at Transfiguration. But outside that, most don't specialize in certain types of *dueling* spells. And Miss Weasley?"

"She seems to have the most luck with spells that do physical damage," Harry admitted. "She's got a right nasty Striking Curse. I don't want to get in the way of her Bludgeoning Curse when she masters it."

"Again, interesting. It isn't that uncommon. Rufus Scrimgeour, the Head of the Auror office, specializes in shielding spells. Only Daphne can compare to him in that field. I once knew a student who specialized in energy-related spells, such as the Blasting Hex and many more. Professor Snape is gifted at spells that affect the mind."

Harry nodded. He knew that Snape was a Master Occlumens and Legillimens, and that's he'd needed both of those talents to evade detection as a spy during the latter stages of the First War. By the time he had changed sides, Daphne and Harry had already fled. Snape had been instrumental in providing anonymous tips during the war, and also helping to round up the remaining Death Eaters after the Fall of Voldemort. About thirty had been sent to Azkaban.

About a hundred more had escaped through bribery and deceit. These included the fathers of at least three of Harry's fellow Slytherin 2nd Years: Crabbe, Goyle, and of course, Malfoy. Parkinson and Bullstrode had also been rumored to have parents that once served

the Dark Lord. Nott's father had been connected, though the links were weak, and it was widely assumed he'd never really chosen a side one way or the other.

"That's good to know, sir," Harry admitted, making a mental note to research that.

"So, what spells have you been learning?" he asked. Again, there was no disapproval or scolding in his voice, simply idle curiosity.

"Well, the basics: Stunning Spell, Disarming Spell, Burning Hex, Blasting Hex, Body-Bind...along with a few others, such as the Shielding Charm and the Cutting Curse...and the Striking Curse, of course. I've been learning a few others on Hermione's advice, the Scalding Hex, for example, though it's not much use under you are underwater."

"There are other uses," Dumbledore replied. "That's quite a repertoire, Harry."

"Yes, for a pair of Second Years and a First Year, I suppose it is."

"Why?" he asked simply, leaning forward. "Why do you feel the need to train like this?"

Harry frowned. "Forgive me, sir, but Hogwarts isn't exactly the safest place to get an education. I've been hexed and beaten by a number of the students, harassed by my own Head of House, and been forced to confront a deadly obstacle course, for lack of a better word, to prevent the man that killed my parents from becoming immortal. Between that and the attacks, I'm not sure why you should have a problem with that."

"I don't, Harry," Dumbledore said. "I happen to agree with you. You *do* happen to be at the center of a number of dangerous situations. It is always good to be prepared."

"Yes...Professor?" Harry asked curiously.

"Yes, Harry?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Have you come any closer to determining who or what is behind the attacks?"

If Dumbledore was caught off guard by Harry's question, it didn't show. "No, I'm afraid not. I must admit that I am very concerned. Miss Turpin was a friend of yours, was she not?"

"Yes," Harry said, nodding. "She and Ginny were probably the last ones to talk to her before..." he trailed off, though it was clear what he was referring to."

"Her parents were quite concerned," Dumbledore confided. "I was concerned myself, not only with her well being, but that we might lose a brilliant Muggleborn such as Lisa."

"It's a fine line," Harry agreed. "They don't understand that wizards and witches can absorb more physical punishment and mature faster. The situations we find ourselves in everyday are terrifying for them."

"Indeed, Harry. It seems as though you have given this quite a bit of thought."

"I have," Harry admitted. "Hermione somehow managed to prevent her parents from finding out she almost died last year. But I'm still a bit worried."

Dumbledore suddenly took on a sympathetic appearance. "I'm sure she would be badly missed. Miss Granger is one of the best students at this school, and not merely in academic performance."

Harry nodded. "Hermione's a great friend. She was the first one to really accept me..."

Dumbledore nodded, his light blue eyes gazing through his half-moon glasses. "I believe that you should be getting to bed, Harry. The hour is late."

Harry got to his feet, and met the Headmaster's eyes. "Thank you, sir."

When Harry had left, Dumbledore walked over to a plain wall with a painting of the Hogwarts Grounds. He tapped a certain brick, and the wall slid into the floor, revealing a simple fire place. He reached into a jar on the floor, and pulled out a handful of floo powder. "Dressler Manor!" he cried.

Daphne Dressler's face appeared in the fireplace. Even though her features were difficult to discern, her worry was evident. "What have you learned, Albus?" she demanded. "You told me that if I agreed to this, you'd tell me *everything*."

Albus sighed. "I cannot say I have learned anything you didn't know. He did seem to get along well with Fawkes, but he detected my subtle Legillimacy probe, and as per your instructions, I did not pursue it."

"Good," Daphne said. "His privacy is very important to him. I won't betray him like that."

"So where do we stand, Daphne?" Albus asked wearily. Daphne frowned.

"I don't know. Harry seemed to enjoy break...his Metamorphic training is going well...but I don't know..."

"Yes?"

Daphne sighed. "Something just seemed...wrong..."

Chapter 15: Seeds of Doubt

Harry filled his friends in on his conversation with Dumbledore the next day. Hermione was rather bothered that he hadn't managed to discover what had turned one of their friends into a statue.

"So he really didn't have any ideas?" Hermione asked. They were currently utilizing Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, for lack of a better place to talk privately. The classroom off the Entrance Hall was being used for the first time in recent memory by Lockhart's 6th Year Class. Apparently, the buffoon had managed to fill his own classroom with noxious fumes while attempting to brew a potion. Snape was strangely enough incapable of lending him aid, and recommended that he simply wait for the fumes to subside.

Which could take anywhere from four days to four years.

"No," Harry said, leaning back against the sinks. Hermione was sitting on one of the window sills, while Ginny was pacing around the entire bathroom, an irritated expression on her face. The normal occupant of the bathroom had fled at the sight of Harry for some reason. Hermione couldn't offer any explanations, but they could do without the depressing spirit anyway.

"That's not good," Ginny said, stating the obvious. "I know he's not perfect, but Dumbledore's the most powerful wizard in Britain...no leads...*nothing*?"

Harry shook his head. "At least none that he told me. Still, the way he was speaking freely and seems to trust me, I don't think he would have hidden any."

Hermione muttered something. "What?" Harry asked.

The bushy-haired Muggleborn looked up. "I'm just frustrated. I've been trying to figure out what in the world could possibly be Petrifying people."

"It's only been two," Ginny pointed out. "It's not like everyone in the school is constantly under attack."

"I know," Harry said. "But that fact that its happened is disturbing enough." He pushed himself up, and began pacing over the wet and cracked tiles of the bathroom.

"And Tom had no ideas?" Hermione asked. After being skeptical of Tom's motives at first, Hermione had had a change of heart after a number of the dueling techniques he told Harry about had been very helpful. He'd also had some useful insight into some difficult Potions and Transfiguration work, the only classes that were really proving to be a challenge for the team of Harry and Hermione.

Ginny though, frowned at the mention of the diary intelligence. But it was brief, before her irritated expression returned. "Ginny, what's wrong?" Harry asked.

She looked up in surprise. "Nothing...well, besides the obvious."

"You frowned when I mentioned that diary," Hermione pointed out. "Honestly, I think we can trust him, he's been really helpful."

"I suppose," Ginny admitted. "It's just something my dad said. He always told me, 'never trust anything that can think for itself if you can't see where it keeps its brain.'...I don't know, it's just strange..."

Harry shrugged. "Daphne knows about the diary, she didn't seem worried. Tom's just lonely, you'd be too if you hadn't had human contact for fifty years...to be perfectly honest, he's a lot like me."

"Okay," Ginny said. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to question your judgment, and I know that that diary is important to you."

"I'm sorry for being so aggressive when you tried to pick it up, but there *is* a reason I've had to lock my bed hangings for the past two years. My privacy is important to me."

Ginny managed a weak smile. "Alright...so what are we going to do now?"

Harry shrugged. "Hermione?"

Hermione blinked for a moment, then shook her head as if to clear it. "Well, I guess we just keep researching...and stay on top of our schoolwork, of course."

"Of course," Harry repeated. Hermione glared at him, and Ginny giggled briefly.

"Alright, enough of that," Ginny said. "We've got work to do, anyway...Harry, could you help me with the Transfiguration? I've been utterly incapable of turning wood into marble, and it's driving me up the wall."

"Alright," Harry agreed. "Why don't we go to the library, and work on it."

However, while the Heir of Slytherin and the attacks were at the forefront of Harry, Hermione, and Ginny's minds, the rest of the school seemed to have placed them on the back burner. No longer did people whisper and point at Harry as he walked by, and Fred and George's method of punishment seemed to have humbled Ron for the time being. Of course, one could never tell with the impulsive young Weasley. It could appear that he'd learned his lesson, only for him to blow up the very next time that Harry encountered him and touched a nerve. Wisely, he hadn't reported what Fred and George had done to him.

Harry glanced over at his timetable. "I've got Charms this morning, what do you have?"

Hermione pulled her own timetable out of her bag. "Herbology."

Ginny did the same. "Transfiguration...Thanks for the help on the marble-wood stuff, by the way," she said. "Professor McGonagall was very impressed...*she also told me to thank you,*" she admitted sheepishly, turning a bit red. Harry laughed.

"She's a sharp old bird, not much gets past her...only a matter of time before she realized you weren't at the top of your grade only because of natural talent...not that you don't have it anyway," Harry amended quickly. Ginny nodded, her cheeks still a bit pink.

"Potter," Nott called over. Harry turned to face him. "Yes, Nott?"

"Would you mind working with me today in Charms? Daphne's come down with something, and I'd rather not chance seeing my marks slip," Nott explained. Harry blinked.

"Fine...any particular reason you chose me?" he asked curiously.

Nott gave him a calculating look. "No."

Harry shrugged; he figured Nott wanted to talk to him about something. "Fine, I'll meet you there."

Harry gave his friends a look that clearly said 'I don't know,' which seemed to answer the questions they'd been poised to ask him.

After breakfast, the three friends separated, with Hermione meeting up with Terry Boot to partner with in Herbology. The two were discussing Thorned Strangleweed, a plant that Harry and Hermione had been introduced to the previous year in Spout's contribution to the defense of the Stone, when Harry felt a presence lurking over him. He glanced up to see the neatly-trimmed brown hair, wire-frame glasses, and calculating visage of Theodore Nott. "Nott," he said in greeting.

"Better get to Charms, Potter," he replied, in a tone that implied boredom more than annoyance. *Nott was a strange boy*, Harry thought.

They arrived at Charms on time, and Harry sat in the seat normally occupied by Greengrass. Flitwick took attendance, pausing to ask where Greengrass was. Nott told him, and once he had checked off everyone's names, he introduced the lesson.

"Well, now that we've finished the *Lumos* Charm, I believe it's time to move onto something a bit more difficult," tiny Professor Flitwick began, jumping onto the stack of books he used so that he could see over his desk.

A few of the Hufflepuffs groaned, something that Harry thought was rather pathetic. Harry, along with most of the Slytherins, could

perform the Lighting Charm in his sleep when he had arrived at Hogwarts. It was rather stupid that the Charm wasn't taught until Second Year, occasionally, Third Year. *Seriously, if you can't make your magic light up the tip of your wand, you have some serious issues...* Harry grumbled mentally. Nott seemed to nod in agreement, indicating he too believed that they should do things that were more challenging.

"Anyway, today we'll be beginning the Cleaning Charm!" Professor Flitwick cried excitedly. Harry could only admire his Professor's enthusiasm, and knew that he was a very good teacher, but right now, this class was boring him to death.

"And next," Nott whispered, "we'll be learning how to turn Gryffindors into lemmings and make them run off a cliff!"

Harry snorted. "That would be Transfiguration, Nott...and even as a lemming, Hermione would be smart enough *not* to run off a cliff. She'd probably sit there and analyze the situation with her small lemming mind, and determine her time was better spent elsewhere. Like studying exactly *why* lemmings run off cliffs."

Nott snickered. "It'd probably kill off most of the Gryffs, though."

"You've got me there," Harry admitted. "You might not need to turn Weasley into a lemming."

"You two!" Flitwick yelled. "Quiet while I am talking! 10 points from Slytherin!"

"Sorry, sir," Harry said in the most genuine voice he could manage.

"Very well, now that Mist^{ers} Potter and Nott have decided to pay attention, I'd like you to follow me. I've located a classroom that is rather badly in need of cleaning."

The class followed Flitwick into what appeared to be an old Potions classroom. The air was dank and smelled of something rather foul. It was also something that Harry wasn't particularly comfortable allowing into his nostrils.

The room was dark, though Harry could make out a dozen or so knocked-over cauldrons, smashed glassware, an upended desk, and a fallen chandelier. Flitwick opened the small windows, allowing a bit of light into the classroom. Harry could now see the spilled potions staining the floor, along with fungus, mold, and spider webs. It was just plain disgusting, something that was vocalized by Hannah Abbot.

“Something die in here?” Zabini asked loudly.

Flitwick gave him a glare, and then chuckled. “I suppose it’s a possibility. I don’t think anyone has been in here since Horace Slughorn was teaching Potions. Alright, you can see there is quite a bit of work to do. Most of you won’t be able to Vanish things yet, so focus on cleaning up the spilled potions and such.”

“I think Peeves had a party in here,” Justin Finch-Fletchley said though his pinched nose. The stench was overpowering.

“This is a job for House-Elves!” Malfoy cried indignantly.

“Be that as it may, Mr. Malfoy, your grade depends on it,” Flitwick snapped. He’d been much more irritable, especially with the Slytherins, ever since Lisa had been attacked. He tended to go easy on Harry and Ginny because he knew they’d been Lisa’s friends. As for the girl herself, she remained petrified in the Hospital Wing.

Harry turned to Nott, who was viewing the scene with distaste. “I think Zabini was right on target,” he commented, surveying the mess. He turned to Harry. “Best get it over with; I assume you can do this spell with your eyes closed, like any half-decent wizard.”

Harry nodded. “Let’s get to work.”

Ernie Macmillan, a pureblood, was apparently as bored as Harry and Nott were. Unfortunately, his technique was severely lacking in, well...success. His first attempt at a Cleaning Charm instead blew up the target cauldron, spewing globs of Merlin-knows-what all over Hannah Abbot and Susan Bones. Susan made a noise of disgust and promptly cast a Cleaning Charm on herself, while Hannah began running around in circles trying to somehow get away from the decades-old potion. Her approach didn’t work particularly well, as she

tripped over another cauldron and landed in another pile of ancient potion remains.

Harry smirked, while Nott snickered. Flitwick managed to extricate the now-crying girl. Harry walked over to her. "Hannah, need a hand?"

The girl with blond pig-tails glared at him. "Not from you, Potter," she snapped angrily.

"I just want to clean you off," Harry said. He was only doing this so that she'd calm down, they'd finish faster, and they could get away from this rotting stench that was causing his eyes to water. Hannah nodded.

"*Scourgify!*" Harry cried. Two more Cleaning Charms and the girl's robes were mostly clean. She gave him a grateful look and ran off.

"Excellent, Mr. Potter. 10 points to Slytherin!"

Harry shrugged; at least he'd earned back the points he'd lost. He walked back over to Nott, who was looking at him strangely. "The sooner she's clean, the sooner we finish, the sooner we get to breathe clean air," Harry explained. Nott nodded.

Between the two of them, they quickly rid their corner of the room of all matter of filth and debris. Nott showed off by Vanishing two cracked cauldrons. Harry gave him a glare for performing the 4th Year magic. "Show off," he muttered.

"The benefits of a pureblood education," Nott countered. "I'm surprised you didn't get the same."

"Daphne had her reasons," Harry replied, not wanting to get into them.

"I'm sure," Nott replied in a knowing tone.

Harry looked around, and saw that the room was mostly clean. Even the Hufflepuffs had managed to master the extremely simple household charm. Flitwick seemed rather pleased. "Excellent. Twenty points to Slytherin and Hufflepuff. Now, I believe we'd best go breathe some fresh air."

Harry couldn't agree with him more. He breathed the fresh air deeply as they exited the classroom. Many of the other students went to do clean themselves up. Harry simply turned his wand on himself. Most of the Slytherins did the same.

Zabini and Bullstrode came up to them. "Oi, Nott," Zabini called out. "What's wrong with Daphne?"

Nott shrugged. "She said she wasn't feeling that good. She was a in a bad mood this morning, might as well just let it be."

"She *can* get real nasty when she's angry," Millicent pointed out. The more Harry saw her, the less he thought his impression of her resembling a troll was accurate. She was a bit heavy, yes, but her dark hair, which was rather handsome, and her sharp brown eyes had no place on a creature of such low intelligence. The Bullstrodes were a Dark family, one that had never allied with Voldemort, but certainly supported his aims. They were also one of the more respected families. Millicent clearly wasn't someone to take for granted.

Really, none of the Slytherins Harry knew were. The Malfoys, obviously, were an old Dark family, even if their origins weren't of England. They'd been rich and powerful in pre-Revolutionary France, as well, before the Squib Robespierre led the Revolution which forced them to flee the continent. Lucius Malfoy was widely believed to have been part of Voldemort's Inner Circle, escaping Azkaban by bribing the Ministry.

His son, Draco, was not nearly the threat that his father was, *yet*. Draco was petty, exceedingly arrogant, rude, and seemingly uncultured; a surprise, considering his background. While Nott, Greengrass, and Zabini knew quite a bit about pureblood politics, Draco seemed to be entirely oblivious to their importance. He wasn't sure, but he suspected that in addition to being the Malfoy Heir, he was also his father's Magical Heir. Magical Heirs were chosen at birth, by both Light and Dark Pureblood families. James Potter had been a Magical Heir, as had Daphne O'Connor. Edmond Dressler had not been a Magical Heir, as his family didn't believe in the custom.

Draco seemed to believe that by his very blood, he was superior to others. Not only that, but that others should treat him with the respect he felt he deserved, without the need to earn it. He believed that special treatment was his birthright. That his Head of House was also his godfather didn't help matters. Snape encouraged it, in a way, by giving Malfoy undeserved points and perfect Potions scores, but he wouldn't put up with the blond-haired boy's incessant whining about unfair treatment from the other teachers.

Draco had the potential to be a great politician and powerful wizard. He had the aristocratic bearing and sharp looks of his noble blood, descending from both the Blacks, who were, along with the Potters, the Rosiers (a line now defunct with the death of Evan Sr. and his son, who had also been a Death Eater and was killed by Alastor Moody), the Boneses, and the McGonagalls, one of the oldest Pureblood families. Draco was also powerful and intelligent, probably a combination of his fine heritage and his status as a Magical Heir. They tended to be more powerful than those who weren't, often far above average. And yet the boy still had a lot of growing up to do.

Still, he wouldn't want to lock horns with the boy when he had matured physically, mentally, and magically.

The Crabbes and Goyles were minor pureblood families, with close ties to the Malfoys. They also were linked with Voldemort. The families were not known for their intelligence, and all of Harry's research seemed to indicate that they had formed an alliance with the Malfoys, seeking protection and guidance. Their sons who currently attended Hogwarts lived up to that standard, and helped to feed Draco's ego. At times, he was like a bully on a playground...until he ran into Harry, or someone else willing and capable of challenging him. Draco had gotten the better of him exactly once...and that had involved hitting him with his back turned, a tremendous offense and cause for dishonor. Draco likely didn't understand that.

Though it seemed what *had* humbled him was being ambushed and beaten by a Muggleborn. *Or Mudblood, a word that rolls off Draco's tongue more freely than 'hello.'*

The Notts were an interesting case, a family that had actually gained its influence and power from inheritances of other Pureblooded families. Theodore's ancestors had carefully arranged marriages to link them with a number of families. Fortunately for them, a number of the Nott's spouses had been killed in a series of goblin rebellions in the 1700s, leaving them with large amounts of gold and with that, a great amount of respect and prestige. The Bullstrodes weren't nearly as old as the Malfoys, but they had gained power slowly, and were respected as a family rich in magical power. The Greengrass family had been transformed from a minor upstart family to a respected and wealthy family by two Greengrass women in the 1750s that had made ground-breaking advances in Potions. Strangely, while Daphne was competent as Potions, as she was with everything, she didn't seem to have the natural flair or instinct one of her blood should have.

Pansy Parkinson was a great deal like Malfoy. Her family was even older than Draco's, and she carried the same arrogance and expectations of the wizarding world to drop to its collective knees and worship her. Her family had been associated with the Dark for a long time, and her mother and father were both said to have served Voldemort in some fashion. It was believed her mother, Grindelia, had been a Death Eater. Her father, Clematis, was rumored to have helped fund Voldemort's war effort. It was of little doubt where their loyalties lay.

Other families of notes in Slytherin included Logan Avery, Thomas Avery's son, a Fourth Year. Avery was a friend of Lucius Malfoy, though their sons were not close. Thomas was also the son of a man who had been among the first Death Eaters, Julius Avery. His son was considered to be one of the Death Eaters that had evaded Azkaban by bribing the Ministry.

Harry didn't know much about the Zabinis, though. They were of Italian and African Ancestry, but they had been mostly out of the country during the First War, and while traditionally Dark, the current Zabinis hadn't declared their alignment. Blaise's mother, Harry knew, was a Songstress, who had married seven times. Her current husband, a powerful wizard, had lasted much longer than any of the others.

“Oi, Potter, are you paying attention?” Millicent’s voice snapped. Harry shook his head to clear it.

“Sorry, got lost in my thoughts,” Harry replied. Zabini frowned.

“Right...”

“What was it you wanted to ask me?” Harry tried again.

“Is it true that you and that Mudblood are...involved?” Millicent asked a hint of distaste in her voice. *What..?*

Harry stared at her. “Absolutely not,” he said with complete certainty. “She’s my best friend, but there’s nothing like *that* going on between us.”

“Oi, Millie, leave him alone about Granger,” Blaise snapped. “It’s his choice who he hangs out with.”

“But she’s a *Mudblood*...and he’s always bringing her to the Slytherin Table,” she complained. Harry frowned, he didn’t think that Millicent would be so easily swayed by the pureblood distain for Muggleborns. It wasn’t as if Hermione hadn’t proved her worth. *Or maybe they just don’t like being shown up by someone they’ve been raised to consider below them...*

“We’d best get going,” Nott pointed out, breaking up an awkward situation. “We’ve got Defense with the Golden Prat.”

“*Diffindo!*” Harry cast. The white sliver of light representing the Cutting Curse burst forth from his wand, adding yet another cross-hatch to the wall that he, Hermione, and Ginny used for target practice. The other two girls were working on homework.

It was early February, and the snow that had blanketed Hogwarts for the majority of the winter was beginnings to melt thanks to some rather unseasonable weather. Still, it wasn’t exactly pleasant, with clear blue skies and bright sunshine. Hence, Harry had decided to use this Saturday afternoon to train. Ginny, on the other hand, had been completely frustrated by essay that she had to write for Snape

on the uses and history of the Sealant Solution. Harry remembered how challenging that potion had been to make, and could hardly blame her for struggling with it.

Overall, the excitement from the Christmas Holidays had been short-lived. First Years and Second Years were rarely given homework (though teachers tended to assign long-term assignments shortly before the break and due shortly after the end), but it had not taken long for Harry to readjust to school life. Defense continued to be an absolute joke, but they'd finally moved on from *Wanderings with Werewolves*. Now, Lockhart was doing daily re-enactments of *Holidays with Hags*. They were about as educational as any of the previous 'lessons,' though at least Lockhart had learned something; he no longer called on Harry or Hermione, indeed, he ignored them all together. That didn't mean that Hermione didn't raise her hand and waive it energetically when the Golden Idiot pretended not to see it.

Of course, it wasn't over for Gilderoy. With Harry and Hermione unable to harass Lockhart, Daphne Greengrass, Blaise Zabini, Millicent Bultstrode, and Theodore Nott had taken to making cutting comments and pointed questions. Nott was even better than either one of them at making Lockhart look like a fool while maintaining an air of innocence. And Lockhart was finding no help from the staff either. Harry had gotten detention twice for simply laughing at him, and both time, Snape has mysterious had something else to do, and let him go a mere five minutes into it. Hermione actually had to clean out a cauldron, *with* magic. Obviously, Harry's Head of House, who had grown increasingly complimentary of Harry's Potions skills. Considering that his mother had been a favorite of Snape's predecessor, it wasn't stunning. Harry's attention to detail and excellent memory allowed him to make adjustments that other students couldn't. Hermione didn't have Harry's talent, as her best subject was Transfiguration (she was now easily surpassing him), but she worked as hard as she could to match him. There was no competition, especially because they always worked together. It would be interesting to see what would happen next year. Snape promised that while they would still be partners, they'd be expected to make their own potions. When they reached NEWT level, there would be no more partners.

He walked around in a circle, then spun around quickly and shot off three Cutting Curses and a Blasting Hex in rapid succession. He felt noticeably winded after that, and had to stop to take a break. Harry had been trying to build up his endurance. He had knowledge of enough spells, but he needed to be able to use them as quickly, effectively, and efficiently as possible. At least, until his magic matured and Daphne could begin teaching him more advanced subject matter.

Three more Cutting Curses later, and he was winded again. Harry sat down, feeling the physical exhaustion beginning to take a toll. He waited until he felt his strength return, and then decided to try something. He seemed to have mastered the Cutting Curse, but it was the Slicing Curse he was most anxious to try. Normally, it required more magical power than a wizard of his age should have, but he decided that he might as well give it a shot. At worst, he'd fail, drain himself, and take a quick nap before meeting Ginny and Hermione at dinner.

Harry turned back towards the oft-abused wall, and raised his wand. He focused as best he could, and then made a diagonal slashing movement with his wand, flicking it at the target brick as he completed the motion. "*Abrumpo!*"

For a twelve-year old wizard's first attempt at a Slicing Curse, it wasn't a bad one. His wand sparked with magic, condensing into a razor-thin blade of white light. It shot towards the wall next to the door at about half the velocity it should have, and missed by about two feet from an improper wand motion, but nonetheless, it managed to make a sizable slash, much more powerful than his best Cutting Curse.

It was a matter of function; the Cutting Curse was designed to cut ropes or vines, or in dueling, to cause minor wounds that did more to cause pain and distract one's opponent than knock him out. On the other hand, the Slicing Curse was designed to be used only in combat, as it was considerable overkill for any other everyday use. Rather than causing a minor cut, it created a wide and deep gash when it hit a target, creating a wound that was also difficult to heal with basic healing magic.

He would have been beaming, though exhausted, if it hadn't been for one thing.

At the instant that the Slicing Curse had left his wand tip, the door had been flung open. And his first attempt at a Slicing Curse had missed Ron Weasley's left arm by about two inches, and appeared to have sliced through his robe. It had also cut cleanly through the door that had been flung in its path. Standing besides Weasley, who appeared to be in a combination of rage and shock, was Neville Longbottom, who was as pale as a ghost.

Harry lowered his wand. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw blood began to seep through the cut in Weasley's jumper. Ron looked at it in disbelief. Harry opened his mouth, realizing that this was about the worst possible scenario he could have imagined, but Ron beat him to it.

"What the *bloody hell* do you think you are doing?" he asked in a deadly quiet voice. Harry closed his eyes. *Yes, this is very bad...*

"*Harry..?*" Neville asked nervously.

The somewhat overweight Gryffindor had managed to have several conversations with the trio recently. Harry thought that between his Auror parents and pureblood background, he had a chance to be a great wizard. The problem was that he was severely lacking in confidence. From what Neville had said, it seemed that his grandmother, whom he lived with, held her son and his wife in extremely high regard, and that Neville was under a lot of pressure (real or imagined) to live up to his parent's reputations. Snape certainly didn't help things, terrorizing the young Gryffindor whenever he screwed up a potion or chopped an ingredient incorrectly. He had a poor memory, and Harry wondered if there was a reason for that.

Harry raised his hands, trying to proclaim his innocence, sliding his wand back into his holster. "Sorry, guys, I was just training. I thought I reinforced the Silencing Charm."

However, that didn't seem to satisfy Ron, who was furious from nearly being hit, and spoiling for a fight. Harry was all too happy to oblige, if that was what it came to. "Yeah, Silencing Charms...you

really need *those* when you're practicing *Dark Magic*, eh Potter?" he whispered nastily.

"What the bloody hell are you talking about?" Harry asked incredulously.

"You know what I'm talking about!" Ron screamed. "You nearly killed me with a bloody *Slicing Curse*! I know that incantation! Lucius bloody Malfoy used it against your own *guardian*! And you are training with it?"

Harry shrugged, trying to let that last comment roll off of him. *He* certainly didn't feel guilty for trying to use the Curse. It was extremely useful in battle, and he'd just been trying it out. "Yes, I am," Harry said evenly. "It's useful to know."

"*Useful? BLOODY USEFUL?*" Ron bellowed. "What other *useful* things have you been learning...*WHAT OTHER USEFULY DARK MAGIC HAVE YOU BEEN TEACHING MY BLOODY SISTER?*" he demanded. "*ANSWER ME!*"

"*I haven't taught her any Dark Magic, Ron,*" Harry replied dangerously. "*She only knows things thus far she would have learned eventually in class.*"

"Yeah, in *Seventh Year*!" Ron yelled. "I know the Shielding Charm is NEWT Level Magic!"

"It shouldn't be," Harry commented. "One needs to be able to defend themselves."

"Yeah, defend themselves from *Dark Wizards* like *you*!" he yelled. "Tell me why I shouldn't go to Dumbledore? The Polyjuice is *nothing* compared to this!"

Harry laughed. He really couldn't help it. "Do you really think Dumbledore doesn't know? I told him everything, and he *encouraged* it!"

"Ron, maybe we should go..." Neville proposed nervously, eyeing Harry with fear in his eyes.

"No! Shut up Neville!" Ron yelled. "I'm going to teach this bloody...*Dark...arrogant...Slytherin git...*"

Harry's expression darkened considerably. "*Call me a Dark Wizard again, Weasley, and you will be very sorry...*" his hissed dangerously. He flicked his wrist, and his wand was clutched tightly in his right hand. Neville's eyes widened.

"Yeah, Potter?" Weasley answered stupidly.

Harry smiled darkly. "What's it like to be outdone in every respect by your *little sister*, Ron?"

Ron turned bright red. He hadn't cooled off since he'd nearly lost his arm, and Harry was just baiting him, taking out built up frustration. His anger from the entire year was now blazing behind his eyes. He was an insult anyway from sending Weasel to the Hospital Wing for a *long* time.

"*What's it like to be a disgrace to your parents' memories, Potter?*" Weasley whispered nastily. "*They must be rolling in their graves seeing what you've become after they gave your life to preserve your worthless existence.*"

It was perhaps the most complex and well-thought out insult that Ron had ever used. It also took Harry's strained emotional control and snapped it like dry kindling. His rage ignited, and his blood pounded in his head. Magic forgotten, he crouched and hurled himself at the taller boy, using his greater strength and balance to overcome Weasley's mass. Harry slugged him in the face, grabbing him by his shoulders.

As he punched Weasley again, the door opened, and there was a pair of feminine gasps and some un-ladylike cursing from Ginny. Ron took advantage of Harry's distraction to flip Harry onto his back and began to pummel him with his fists. Harry coiled his strength, and then pushed hard, shoving Ron off of him and landing on a knee, blood flowing from his lip and nose. Ron didn't look much better.

He felt arms wrapped around his waist, pulling him back. A flash of bushy-brown hair told him it was Hermione. He allowed his best friend to haul him to his feet. Neville had Ron's arms pinned behind

his back, while the redhead was determinedly trying to break free and continue using Harry as a punching bag. Harry's pulse was pounding in his head, and he briefly struggled with Hermione, who was trying to calm him down. "...it's not worth it, Harry...leave him alone...let him be a git..." Harry tried to relax. Hermione let him go when he stopped struggling, and he wiped his bloody lip and nose on his robes, glaring at Ron. The redhead returned his death glare, and was still being restrained. Ginny was now standing in between both of them.

"What's going on here?" she demanded. Harry was actually glad that she was taking the time to find out what was going on before taking action. It wouldn't help matters if she immediately sided with Harry.

"Git was practicing Dark Magic," Ron grumbled, staring accursedly at Hermione, who frowned.

"Were you?" she asked, a bit of concern in her voice.

"I suppose you could say that," Harry admitted. "I just tried out a Slicing Curse." Hermione nodded.

"That's not all!" Ron protested. "He nearly killed me with it!"

Ginny rounded on Harry, brown eyes blazing. "*What?*"

"I didn't mean to hurt him, nor did I," Harry explained. "I was aiming at the wall and missed. They opened the door; I didn't know they were there."

Ginny looked into his eyes, as if trying to determine if he was telling the truth. Apparently, her crush wasn't bothering her at the moment. She nodded curtly. "Alright, I don't know what happened here, but this is ridiculous."

"I agree," Hermione said. "You two are wizards, not Neanderthals!"

Harry hung his head in shame. Ron wasn't so tactful. "Yeah, Neanderthals with wands...trying to kill fellow students," he spat.

Ginny spun around, eye's blazing. "*Shut. Up. Ron. Before I send a Striking Curse where it will hurt the most.*"

Ron paled. "You wouldn't..."

"Maybe she would, but I won't let her," Hermione interrupted. "Neville, Ron, OUT!"

Neville grabbed Ron by the robe sleeve and pulled him out of the room. The redhead spat in Harry's direction. Harry's anger bristled. What Ron had just done was among the most offensive gestures in the wizarding world. The idiot probably didn't even know that one could be challenged to a duel for it.

Hermione buried her head in her hands when he left, while Ginny closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Hermione was the first to recover. She turned to Harry, looking very tired.

"Would you care to explain what just happened?"

Harry awoke in his bed in the Slytherin Dormitory. He blinked as he saw that it was still daylight. Yawning, he checked his watch, and saw that it was still 4 o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. Most of the school was outside on this beautiful, unseasonably warm February day. Tom Riddle's diary remained open on his bed, and Harry remembered he'd been having a discussion with Tom about Potions when he'd apparently fallen asleep. He was briefly alarmed that his curtains were open, but the diary appeared untouched, as his quill was still lying on top of it, and he hadn't been attacked in his sleep.

Harry jumped out of his four-poster, and decided to try to find his friends. He remembered that Hermione had mentioned that she and Ginny were going to take a walk around the Grounds and the lake and stop in to see Hagrid. They'd agreed to meet at dinner, and Hermione had encouraged Harry to take a nap if he felt he could use it. Harry tossed the diary and quill into his trunk and locked it, slipped on his trainers, and left the Slytherin dormitory, bound for the library.

Harry left the dungeons, climbing up the stairs into the Entrance Hall. He thought of just trying to find his friends on the Grounds, but then remembered the assignment that Snape had (rather politely) asked him to do, a research project on rare antidotes. He said that he had been impressed by Harry's work thus far, and wanted to see if he

could do 'more than the other dunderheads in the class.' Harry, knowing that he wanted to get of Snape's good side, quickly agreed.

The Boy-Who-Lived said hello to Nearly-Headless Nick, who was grumbling about something involving 'the headless hunt,' or something like that. Nick had been in a foul mood often since about Halloween. Harry didn't have that much interaction with the ghosts, though he had talked to the Grey Lady and to the Bloody Baron before. He often said hello to Nick. The Gryffindor ghost looked up as he did so.

"Hello Harry!" he said brightly. "What are you doing inside on this fine day?"

Harry shrugged. "Taking a nap, I suppose. I'm going to the library. If you see Hermione or Ginny, could you tell them that?"

"Sure thing, Harry," the ghost replied.

Harry thanked Nick, and shaking his head as the ghost began grumbling again, he ascended the stairways the 2nd floor corridor. As he proceeded, the hair began to stand up on the back of his neck. He flicked his wrist, and his wand shot into his hand. He glanced nervously over his shoulder.

Something was wrong. *Very* wrong.

Cautiously, he proceeded forward, around a curve in the castle.

And then he stopped, mouth dropping open at the sight before him.

Dean Thomas and Ron Weasley were lying on the ground in front of a large mirror, Petrified. Dean's mouth was open in a silent scream, and his head was turned slightly to the right, as if to find out what was behind him. Ron appeared to have been livid when he was Petrified. His eyes were narrowed and his mouth open to yell. Harry imagined he must have been bright red before he was felled. Harry glanced around, raising his wand. Carefully, he proceeded past the two Petrified boys, searching for whatever had attack them. His eyes widened at the sight of the scorch marks on the castle floor and walls;

he remembered that Hermione had mentioned the same thing when they found Mrs. Norris.

He quickly ducked around a corner, but saw nothing. He wasn't sure if he should be relieved or panicked. He couldn't just leave; he may not have thought much of Weasley, but he wasn't going to do nothing. Even more importantly, if he was seen fleeing the scene, that could create some major problems. Harry wished at that instant that he had remembered to bring his Invisibility Cloak. It would certainly allow him to slip away unnoticed.

He was stuck. Harry bent down to look at Thomas, staring into his glassy eyes. It was eerily similar to the effects of the *Avada Kedavra* Killing Curse, but the fact that his limbs were extended and stiff as marble betrayed his true state. Harry took another deep breath, trying to calm his racing heart. He got up and bent over Weasley, his hands on his knees, hoping for some clue as to who or what had done this to them.

He found nothing. *Though they had been standing in front of a mirror, for some reason...*

Then, a patter of soft footsteps, a horrified gasp and strangled cry, and a loud thump as a number of books were dropped to the floor. The silence echoed, and Harry silently cursed.

Slowly, dreading what he'd see, knowing that he couldn't look *more* guilty, Harry raised his head. He sucked in a breath as he took in the sight of the *worst possible* person that could have found him. The person he'd been silently praying wouldn't find out until she heard it from his own mouth.

Ginny Weasley was rocking back and forth, her arms still extended from where she'd been carrying several library books. Her face was pale, a pasty white, completely devoid of blood.

It was her eyes that were the worst, though. Her warm brown eyes, which could be full of a bevy of emotions ranging from mischief, to friendliness, to love, to anger, to despair.

But the one emotion he'd never seen Ginny express was the one that he saw now as her eyes raked his frozen body accusingly. It was a look of complete and total betrayal, mixed in with shock and burning rage.

Harry felt his body go numb as she screamed at him.

"HOW COULD YOU?" she shrieked, tears streaking down her face. *"I TRUSTED YOU! HOW COULD YOU?"* Her last cry was broken up by an anguished sob. With her betrayal still burning a hole in Harry's heart, she turned and fled.

Harry collapsed against the wall, his mind racing. *She can't be right...I was sleeping*, he told himself.

But what if she is? a strangely familiar voice asked softly, almost mockingly. *What if Ron's been right all along? What if you've been the one attacking people...Remember the roosters?*

Harry felt his blood run cold as a fuzzy memory came back to him. *But it was a dream! It had to be! I didn't...*

Don't fool yourself; it's unbecoming of your intelligence, the voice snapped condescendingly. *You did kill those roosters...yet you don't remember it, do you...*

STOP IT! he screamed at the mysterious voice. *I can't be the Heir of Slytherin, I can't...I'm not attacking students*, he told himself, his mental voice panicked.

I've got to tell Daphne, he realized abruptly. *She'll know what to do; she always knows what to do. She loves me; she'd never abandon me...*

Do you know that? The voice snarled in his head. *Can you take that risk?*

But if it is me, what I attack Hermione next? Or Ginny?

NO! You CANNOT tell them, the voice commanded, a tone of malice filling it. Harry felt nervous suddenly, as he slumped against the wall.

You will tell NO ONE, Harry, the voice commanded. Harry stiffened, and his mind went strangely fuzzy. Seconds later, he blinked and his memories of what he had found, of what Ginny had done, came racing back to him, hitting him with the force of the Hogwarts Express. He started violently when he heard a cry of alarm from McGonagall, and glanced up to see both her and Hermione with matching expressions of horror on their faces.

"Harry, what happened? When did you find them?" Hermione whispered. She had no idea how much relief her words brought him. *At least she believes my innocence...*

"Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked coldly.

Harry took a deep breath. "I was taking a nap, and was heading up to the library. I found them here; I swear I had *nothing* to do with it!"

McGonagall looked grave. "I believe you, Harry. I know you didn't get along with Mr. Weasley, but I don't believe that you would go *this* far."

"Ginny found me first," Harry mumbled miserably.

"Damnit!" Hermione loosed a rare curse. "I'll find her, Harry; I'll talk sense into her."

"I hope you can," Harry replied dejectedly.

"Very well," Professor McGonagall interrupted. "Hopefully, Miss Weasley hasn't told anyone else. I need you two to keep this quiet. Return to your dormitories, *now*," she said, in a tone that said that the argument was over. Hermione through Harry a helpless look, and wandered back towards the Slytherin Dormitory. He stopped only to pick up Ginny's library books.

Harry slowly made his way down the dormitories. He left Ginny's books on the table, and wandered into the 2nd Year Boys dorms. He collapsed onto the bed, his mind reeling.

Harry didn't go to dinner, but he didn't sleep, either. The look on Ginny's face was haunting him. As was the possibility that she might have been right.

And that possibility frightened him. It frightened him more than anything.

Who am I kidding? Harry scolded himself mentally. *I can't tell Daphne about this! I've got to handle it on my own. I can't always go running to her for help. If it gets any worse, then I'll get help. But I'm fine for now.*

Trying to get these disturbing thoughts out of his mind, Harry snuck out of his bed and crept into the Slytherin Common Room. It was near midnight, and Harry was regretting not going to dinner. Briefly, he thought about getting his Invisibility Cloak and going to the kitchens (he seen Fred and George sneaking in before), but decided not to when he saw the object of his fears standing in the middle of the Slytherin Common Room in front of the still roaring fire. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and Harry could see tear tracks glistening in the flickering light.

"Ginny?" Harry asked nervously. He hoped that Hermione had gotten through to the redhead; he wasn't sure if the tears were for his 'betrayal' or her foolishness and shame.

His friend jumped nearly a foot in the air, spinning around, and her eyes wide. "*Harry?*"

He nodded. Ginny began to nibble on her lip, a nervous quirk she'd picked up from Hermione. Though Hermione tended to make it a full bite. "*I'm sorry...*" she whispered in an almost inaudible voice.

Harry walked over to her, opening his arms. Without thinking twice, she flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around his waist. Harry squeezed her tightly, and she began to sob quietly into his robes. Harry blinked as he felt his own eyes prickle with tears. Then he let them come.

Ginny was one of his best friends, one person he trusted almost absolutely.

He couldn't afford to lose her.

Chapter 16: Eyes of the Serpent

As Harry had learned the hard way, during his first two years at Hogwarts, the rule was generally, "Guilty until proven innocent." So it goes in a school of young and adolescent wizards and witches. Professor McGonagall had, apparently, informed her House of what had happened to Ron and Dean. And while she hadn't mentioned Harry by name, Hermione had been more or less forced to reveal to Ron's brothers what Harry's involvement in the entire thing had been.

From that time onward, they weren't openly hostile, but they sent suspicious looks at him often, almost unconsciously. The rest of the school picked up on this, however, and between their glances, and the fact that Harry was widely suspected of being the mysterious Heir of Slytherin, glares, frightened looks and students running from his path became a common occurrence.

The Ravenclaw's wouldn't even let him sit at their table anymore. From the apologetic looks given to him by Mandy, Terry and Padma, they'd been ordered to insure that Harry sat with his Housemates. Harry braved the grumbling and whispered insults, and had Hermione sit with him and Ginny at the Slytherin table. It was just one of many inconveniences that the Heir of Slytherin had brought upon him.

Ginny wasn't very happy either. Despite Hermione's reassurances, the remaining Weasley brothers took the opportunity at breakfast the next morning to have a heart-to-heart chat about her best friends. Ginny had returned with an expression that mixed anger, sadness and frustration. Apparently, the Weasley boys had sat her down, treating her like a child (something that Ginny was not happy about.) Fred and George had then done everything they could to make Ginny admit that she was uncomfortable around Harry, believing, just as Ron did, that she still had a furious crush on him, and that it was coloring her view of him. Ginny's crush had been 'crushed' into a fine powder at this point, something that made interaction between Harry and Ginny much more comfortable for both parties. Ginny was just happy to have Harry as a friend, and no longer thought of him in terms of the Boy-Who-Lived.

It took long enough... Harry thought soberly.

As Harry walked silently down the hallway on the Second Floor, more or less aimlessly wandering, he saw what looked like the Weasley's climbing the stairs up to the Hospital Wing. It was not just Fred, George and Percy, however, Harry could recognize them from behind. Ginny was there, shyly bringing up the rear. Also, Harry spotted the plump shape of Molly Weasley, and a tall, balding redhead that he remembered as Arthur Weasley. *They must be coming to visit Ron...strange that Ginny never mentioned it.*

The Weasley's were speaking in hushed tones, and appeared very grave indeed. Harry supposed that he'd either missed the visit of the Thomas's or that they hadn't arrived yet. Surely with a pair of Muggles who knew about magic, Dumbledore would allow them to come to see their son.

...Harry, I assure you, I've never done anything to harm you. You are my only and constant companion, and it worry's me greatly to see you so doubting of yourself.

Be that as it may, Tom, you are the only thing that has changed in the last year. I never believed that I might have been attacking people last term.

People were not being attacked last year...but I understand. Forgive me for panicking, but you are a bright young man, Harry, and it would pain me beyond words to lose your companionship.

Well, what is your explanation for what has been happening? Tom, I'm surprised I haven't noticed before, but you do seem to know quite a bit about this. I think you are hiding something.

I don't know what you mean, Harry. I went to school during the time of the war with Grindelwald and Hitler, and that was that. I was an orphan who became an extremely powerful wizard, and became both feared and respected. I cannot tell you what became of my future self, if that is what you mean.

I suppose you can't. I searched through the library, but never saw a mention of Tom Marvolo Riddle anywhere. I suppose its possible you were killed during the Rise of Voldemort.

A pity that would be; a waste of my talent. But it is not healthy to live in the past.

I agree with that. Any wizard able to create a diary as powerful as this must have been quite talented.

And yet I was never respected. Always, I was considered to be below others. I was a parentless half-blood in Slytherin, something greatly looked down upon. I had no powerful and influential friends...not that I needed them. In time I'm sure I gathered power and many friends in high places.

I wouldn't doubt it.

Something else is bothering you, Harry.

Aren't we sharp today? Yes, there is something. I've just been blacking out all year, and waking up to find out that something strange has happened. I understand that I might be sleepwalking, but the coincidences are just too much.

Indeed. Have you spoken to Daphne?

No. I haven't. I had to lie to Hermione in Potions. I told her that Ron had been attacked, but I said nothing else, as that I found them and have begun to suspect myself...I know she'll still love me, but it's just embarrassing...I don't want her to know. I can handle myself; I've been surviving Slytherin without her help for two years.

Yes, you have done well in unenviable circumstances. You have managed to gain powerful and loyal friends, while also maintaining the respect of your peers...at least the ones that matter.

Ravenclaws and Slytherins? Well, most Slytherins respect me for Quidditch. Draco Malfoy and his bodyguards think me a rival. Nott and Greengrass...well, I can't tell if they like me or just like to mess with me. Zabini seems a pleasant sort. Parkinson's a stuck-up prat, and Bullstrode is...well, I don't really know, I haven't seen much of her. Moon is a loner, keeps to herself most of the time.

What about your Ravenclaw friends? I admit I was originally thinking Slytherin, but I see the advantages in having intelligent friends. Ravenclaws are often good fighters as well, because they have a greater knowledge of magic. In battle, the Gryffindors are the infantry sent to the slaughter by the Ravenclaws. The Hufflepuffs are the Healers who patch together the wounded Gryffindors. The Slytherins are the politicians who sent them all there in the first place. It is the natural order of things. We command all others, and have true power. The Gryffindors may claim their bravery places them above the 'slimy' Slytherins, but we are the ones in power. Who is the Head of the Auror Office? Rufus Scrimgeour, a Slytherin...or so you've told me.

Yes, he was. But, Daphne was a Ravenclaw, and one of the finest Aurors they ever had.

You have proven my point. In a large-scale battle, her superiors would hardly wish to have her talent wasted on the battlefield. They'd keep her behind, in reserve, so that when she did strike, it would do the most damage, and she'd be protected from the longest period of time. Daphne is irreplaceable. A common foot soldier is not.

I see your point...I don't believe that Cornelius Fudge ever attended school here, at least, if he did, there is no record of it. I'm not sure which House he would have been in; he doesn't seem the type for Slytherin.

I don't know about that. I tell you again, Harry, your class is very unusual in that you have the sons and daughters of Death Eaters; clear-cut Slytherins. Most of the time, one never knows that they are Slytherin until the Hat cries it out. There are many wizards and witches that were Slytherins that seem to possess none of the requisite qualities at all. Gilderoy Lockhart, for example.

Yes, it is quite remarkable. I suppose there is a difference between Slytherins and 'good' Slytherins. The difference between being

sneaky and still getting caught and being sneaky and getting away with it.

Precisely, Harry.

Are you sure that you don't have any other information on the Chamber of Secrets?

As a matter of fact, Harry, I do. I have rather...interesting information. The problem is that I'm not sure you want to see it.

And why, pray tell, would that be?

Because it involves one of your friends in a rather...compromising situation. And I'm talking something that got him expelled, not fooling around with a girl.

I'm twelve, Tom, I don't need to know about that. Who is it?

I can show you...

Do so.

Remove your hands from the diary. I can take you into the memory. Remember that it is a past event, and you cannot alter it in anyway.

It's like a Pensieve, then?

Oh, Harry. I'm far more than a simple Pensieve...but for this function, yes, it works the same way.

May I ask where I am going? And when I'll be back.

You are going into my memories of 6th year, in 1944. The Headmaster at the time was a man named Armando Dippet. I have no doubt his portrait hangs in Dumbledore's office.

Sounds intriguing. Let's go.

I will see you later, Harry...

With that, the diary flipped open violently to a date in June. The page began to glow, and Harry's eyes widened. He felt his very body being transformed into magical energy, and closed his eyes as he disappeared from his four-poster bed, falling into Riddle's memory.

Harry landed softly on the stone floor of the Entrance Hall. The scene around him was not in color, but rather in the kind of brown and white that wizarding photos were often taken in. He glanced around and saw a procession coming down the stairs carrying a stretcher which appeared to contain a body. A small, limp arm was hanging out one side of the sheet that covered the corpse. One of the wizards carrying it, a short man with balding grey hair and beady eyes, tucked the arm back inside the makeshift pall. Harry walked closer, hoping for a glimpse of the girl, but the procession moved out the doors, and when Harry tried to follow them, he was pulled back.

He glanced up to see a teenage boy wearing Hogwarts robes with a Slytherin crest and a shiny Prefect's badge. The boy was taller than Harry, and had neatly trimmed black hair, along with dark blue eyes. He had a regal bearing about him, surprising for a boy raised at a Muggle orphanage. He must have had powerful Pureblood ancestry, something that Harry wasn't surprised about, considering his prowess in constructing the diary.

Standing nearby the Slytherin Prefect, watching the scene with a grim expression, was a man of medium height, balding, and cold brown eyes. He wore fine wizarding robes, but somehow they did not add to his presence in the least. Riddle managed to radiate power and control wearing nothing but standard student robes, but this man appeared weak and spineless. Harry recognized the man now; it was Armando Dippet, the Headmaster whose portrait hung in Dumbledore's office, just like that of all the Headmasters and Headmistresses of the school.

"You shouldn't be here, Tom," he said in a somewhat-grandfatherly tone. "The girl's parents will be coming for the body tomorrow. After that, well, we may have to close the school. The Petrifications were bad enough, but an actual death..."

Tom's eyes widened. "Close the school?" he breathed. "No, you can't!"

"I'm sorry, my dear boy," Dippet said, actually appearing apologetic, "but we may not have a choice."

"You know where I live during the holidays, don't you?" Riddle asked, actual fear apparent in his voice. "In a Muggle Orphanage, a foul place, and not simply because of the lack of magic."

Dippet frowned. "Tom, I believe you may be exaggerating the situation a bit. Surely you are in no danger there."

"No," Tom said darkly, "not since I taught them that I was a force to be reckoned with..."

"I hope you didn't reveal your abilities, Tom," the Headmaster scolded. "You know what could happen then."

"Of course I do," Tom replied.

Dippet yawned. "The hour is late, Tom. I do beg of you to retire."

"Professor, is there anyway I might be able to stay over the summer? Anyway at all?"

Dippet shook his head. "Mr. Riddle, I truly am sorry, but even if the Board gives us permission to open next year, I'm afraid that it is strictly against school policy to allow students to stay over, unless in the most dire of circumstances. I'm afraid that your dislike of the Muggle orphanage does not qualify...I must admit I am surprised that you have not been adopted."

"I'd rather stay in the Orphanage than live with Muggles, sir."

Dippet frowned again. So did Harry. "To each his own, I suppose."

"Professor, if the culprit was caught, would it be possible for the school to open again? Or for me to stay over."

"I'd certainly have a better chance of persuading the Board of Governors," Dippet admitted. He turned to his favorite student, a suspicious frown forming on his features. "Do you know something about these attacks, Tom?"

Riddle started a bit. Harry could see that as deceptive and manipulative as the boy could be, he hadn't been expecting that.

"No sir, of course not," he replied evenly, not betraying his surprise. Harry could tell he was lying, of course. "I simply...well, I was just taking a stab in the dark...I suppose I should retire then..."

Dippet placed a hand on Riddle's shoulder, a bit of sympathy shining in his eyes. "I am so sorry, Tom, but my hands are tied. Hopefully, we'll catch this Heir of Slytherin, and all will be well again."

Dippet walked away and Harry moved closer to Tom, who was mumbling something to himself. Then his eyes lit up. He began to hurry down to the dungeons, but nearly ran into a very tall man with an auburn hair and beard, along with his trademark blue eyes and half-moon spectacles. It was unmistakably a much younger Albus Dumbledore.

"Tom, what are you doing patrolling the castle this late at night?" Harry's future Headmaster asked. "Surely you are not on patrol, not after what happened to that poor girl?"

"No sir. I was simply discussing something with the Headmaster. I wish to stay over the summer, sir."

"I see," Dumbledore said. "I'm guessing your request was denied."

"It was, sir," Riddle said. Harry noticed that his eyes had hardened as soon as he'd begun to talk to Dumbledore.

"Heading to bed, I hope?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes, sir," Riddle replied flawlessly. "I'll see you tomorrow in Transfiguration. More Conjuring, I hope?"

"Ah, yes indeed. I am glad that you are enjoying it, you seem to be quite skilled." Only a Slytherin could have detected the veiled accusation in Dumbledore's words. Harry immediately understood why Tom was so interested in Albus Dumbledore. They had not gotten along very well.

"I look forward to it, sir."

Dumbledore departed, and Riddle proceeded deep into the dungeons. Harry shadowed him, growing ever more curious about what Tom had wanted to show him.

Riddle stopped in front of a heavy oak door. He pulled out his wand, then thought better of it and simply shoved the door open.

Inside, Harry saw what was unmistakably the much-younger version of the current Hogwarts' gamekeeper and his good friend, Rubeus Hagrid. The boy was very large for his age, with thick black hair and beady black eyes. He appeared to be attempting to coax some kind of creature into a wooden box. Harry's eyes widened as he realized what this meant.

"Evening, Rubeus," Riddle drawled. Hagrid spun around angrily, but Harry could see the terror in his eyes.

"What do yeh want, Tom?" Hagrid snapped, as he continued to shove whatever it was into a crate.

"It's over, Hagrid. The girl's parents will be coming for her body tomorrow...they may have to close the school...I'm sure you didn't mean for it to hurt anyone, just to take it out on a stroll, I suppose..."

"Don't know what yer talking 'bout, Tom," Hagrid protested. "Aragog would never hurt nobody!"

"Aragog, is it?" Tom asked with a hint of genuine curiosity. "No matter...you'll be expelled for this, Rubeus. You'll be lucky to escape Azkaban. The Ministry isn't quite so kind of those of your...heritage."

"No," Hagrid breathed "not Azkaban. I can't go ter Azkaban."

"It's the only place fitting for a boy such as yourself. Really, Hagrid, you've made the Forbidden Forest your secret dwelling place. Raising werewolf cubs under your bed, wrestling with trolls. Perhaps you should live there with your fellow beasts."

Tom smiled evilly and Harry was torn between stunned disbelief that Hagrid was responsible and dislike of Tom's behavior...then he realized he probably didn't look any nicer blackmailing Ron.

Hagrid didn't appear to have listened to anything Tom had said. He was still mumbling. "Not Azkaban...can't go ter Azkaban..."

"Perhaps you will; perhaps you won't... Hand it over, Rubeus."

"No," Hagrid replied firmly. He suddenly flung a creature out of his arms. Harry caught a glimpse of many hairy legs and beady eyes, and realized that it was some kind of spider...an acromantula, most likely. Riddle drew his wand very quickly, and fired a nonverbal Blasting Hex, which scorched the floor but missed his target. Hagrid roared and lunged at Riddle, knocking him to the ground as the giant spider ran out of sight.

Harry felt his body begin to materialize again, and he was being pulled away from the scene, drifting further into the dungeons...

Harry sat up with a start, wiping his sweat-soaked brow. The diary was lying innocently on his bed, closed. Harry began to process what he'd discovered.

Then he realized something. Something that Hermione had said about Acromantulas while researching methods of petrification.

"What about these giant spiders, Hermione?" Ginny asked. "I'm sure they'd be quite useful for scaring Ron, but could they be petrifying people...with their venom or something?"

Hermione looked thoughtful, then opened a book on dangerous magical creatures. They'd managed to allow Lockhart to give them free access to the Restricted Section, and Madam Pince didn't seem to mind them examining books on Dark creatures as opposed to Dark Spells. Or perhaps she reported to Dumbledore, who would probably

encourage it if that were proper behavior to be expected from a Headmaster.

"I'm afraid not, Ginny," Hermione replied. "Acromantula venom is among the most prized potions ingredients on the market...here's the section on its properties...it does cause paralysis, but only in the process of killing the victim." She closed the book. "It doesn't petrify people, it kills them."

Harry angrily pulled the diary open. Besides the fact that Hagrid was hardly one to be able to hide anything of this magnitude, the man was relatively harmless, (save when his anger was aroused,) and as a half-giant, wouldn't have a problem with Muggleborns. *Also, the idea of Hagrid being the Heir of Slytherin is laughable. Salazar would be rolling in his grave.*

Harry dipped his quill in ink, and wrote quickly:

Why did you lie to me, Tom?

What do you mean, Harry?

You know as well as I do that what Hagrid was hiding was a giant spider, probably an acromantula. They don't petrify people.

Tom wrote nothing for a long moment.

I'm sorry, Harry. I was wrong at the time. You must understand, I was not exaggerating when I told Dippet that the orphanage was unpleasant. It was bloody abusive!

I'm sorry about that, Tom. But you've betrayed my trust, tried to make me-

SLEEP

And with that, Harry pitched forward on his bed, slumping on top of the diary.

Tom Marvolo Riddle invaded Harry's mind and began ensuring that he would never remember this conversation.

When Harry awoke the next day, it was to rather grim news from Hermione.

She'd decided to visit Hagrid about some creatures she had found references to in her research. Hermione left before breakfast, but when she arrived at his hut, she found that the doors and windows had been locked. Nailed to the door was a Notice of Arrest. Obviously, the Ministry had taken Hagrid the previous night.

As for Hagrid, Harry had a hard time believing it. Ginny and Hermione thought the idea was laughable. Hagrid may have been a half-giant, but he was harmless under normal circumstances, and certainly had no relation to Salazar Slytherin...unless the Hogwarts Founder had somehow had...relations with a giantess. Hagrid's father had been a Muggleborn.

Nearly three months passed with no attacks, and some students took this as a sign that Hagrid had actually been the culprit. There were a number of people who claimed to have 'known it the entire time,' but Harry realized that months had passed between the attacks on Lisa and the Gryffindors, so the long period of inactivity meant absolutely nothing.

The Slytherins were still riding high from their tremendous victory over the Hufflepuffs from the day after Valentine's Day. A day that would forever be engraved in Harry's memory, in the most embarrassing sense of the word. The scars that the Weasley twins had received weren't likely to fade soon either.

Lockhart had decided that in order to 'cheer everyone up,' they would celebrate Valentine's Day. The Great Hall had been decorated in pink and red, an absolutely horrendous color scheme. That wasn't the worst of it, however. Lockhart had been like a herald, directing people to seek out Professor Snape for advice on Love Potions, (which were not only banned in the school, but it would likely be dangerous to one's health to ask Snape about such a topic,) or to ask Professor Flitwick to teach them about Entrancing Enchantments, (which were illegal and could earn a person a hefty fine, or even a spell in Azkaban for repeated use.) Harry doubted anyone had actually done

either of these things. If they had done the latter, they probably no longer inhabited the Earth...or were, at the very least, in the Poison Treatment Ward of St. Mungo's.

However, what had been the worst part of that horrible day had been the dwarfs. The fat, bald, unshaven male dwarves that had run around harassing people with Valentine's gifts. And Fred and George had gotten a hold of one.

Harry had Silenced the dwarf before it could recite the entire poem, but at that point, it was too late. Harry had permanently purged the words from his memory, but nonetheless, Ginny's cheeks had matched the color of her hair, and even Harry had felt his cheeks warm. Ginny had disappeared after that, chasing the twins, who were hiding behind a pillar down the hallway. The next time Harry saw them, they were wincing with almost every movement, and their faces were cut up and covered in...well, boogies. They fled comically at the sight of Harry.

The week had been salvaged, however, by the absolute thrashing the Slytherin's put on Cedric Diggory's hapless Hufflepuff squad. Two of their Chasers had been knocked out by Bole's Bludgers, leaving the one remaining, a boy named Evan Summerby, to fend for himself. He'd been unable to do anything as Flint, Pucey, and Montague effortlessly battered the Hufflepuff Keeper, scoring at will. Warrington hadn't even needed to move, not that he did on a normal basis. It was 40-0 at Diggory's first timeout. 100-0 at his second. 140-10 at his third (after a penalty shot for Bole's hit that took out one of the Hufflepuff Chasers.) At his fourth and final timeout, it was 250-10, his Beaters had yet to make contact with a Bludger, his keeper looked half-dead, and he had had no more luck than Harry finding the Snitch. Very soon after Hooch began play again, Harry put the Hufflepuffs out of their misery. The Slytherins had the Quidditch Cup all but won; Gryffindor would need to beat Ravenclaw by 450 points if the Lions were to rally.

The celebration was raucous and rowdy, to say the least. Large amounts of Firewhiskey were smuggled in and half the House was absolutely plastered the next morning. Harry and Ginny had wisely decided to wait it out inside Harry's four-poster bed, reading and doing homework with the aid of Silencing Charms. They had had to

deal with some lewd insinuations when they emerged, but they both agreed that *not* contributing to the sick that littered the Slytherin Common Room was worth it. Harry later found that Blaise, Nott, Daphne, Millicent, and all of the Slytherin First Years had had the same idea.

Snape *was* remarkably furious about the events of the night, but the question remained of how the Firewhiskey had gotten into the Dormitory without his knowledge...and how all of the perpetrators escaped serious punishment. McGonagall might have skinned them alive if they had been Gryffindors.

Harry yawned as he and Hermione descended into the dungeons for potions. *It's only a matter of time...*

Hermione sighed as a pack of Ravenclaw girls fled from her best friend's path, whispering in excited and frightening tones. A few boys glanced wearily at Harry, who didn't seem to have noticed them. Hermione had to admit that her friend was doing an admirable job, but it was still wearing on him.

It had been nearly three months since Ron Weasley and Dean Thomas became the latest victims of the mysterious Heir of Slytherin. The news had been spread by none other than Professor McGonagall, who, while she concealed Harry's role in the entire affair, still thought it improper to conceal the event. She'd called the entire House together after dinner, and explained vaguely the events of the afternoon.

The students in Gryffindor were tense. Seamus Finnegan and Neville Longbottom were more anxious than the rest. Neville was constantly looking around the Common Room, as if expecting Ron and Dean to walk in. The rumors had been spreading like wildfire in their absence. One thing that all the Gryffindors knew was that Weasley's never missed a meal, especially Ron.

When McGonagall called them all together in the Common Room before curfew, they knew it wasn't good news. She stood there in the front of the room, her face an emotionless mask. But Hermione

already knew what she was going to say. She was just praying that she wouldn't mention Harry.

He was innocent...he had to be. It didn't matter what it had looked like, Harry looked downright horrified when they found him, and it didn't look like the horror of being found out or of doing something appalling. It was explained as soon as Harry mentioned that Ginny had found him standing over her brother. It was the horror of a boy who thought he'd forever lost one of the few people who believed in him, one of the few people who trusted him!

"As I'm sure a number of you have noticed," Professor McGonagall began, "Misters Thomas and Weasley are not among us." She took a deep breath. The room was silent; even the gossiping of Lavender and Parvati had ceased. All of the Gryffindors, from Seventh Year to wide-eyed First Years, had their eyes trained on their Head of House.

"I'm afraid to report that they have been the latest victims of the Heir of Slytherin," she finally said. There were a number of gasps or whispered exclamations of disbelief and anger. Fred, George, and Percy Weasley had gone pale. Percy was shifting nervously

She quieted the room with her trademark glare. "Misters Weasley and Thomas were found this afternoon. They are petrified, but otherwise unharmed." Hermione was somewhat surprised that she added the last and it apparently didn't do much to reassure Ron's brothers. Or anyone else in the room, as the students exploded with questions.

"Who did it?"

"Are they going to close the school?"

"Have you caught the Heir yet?"

"What if someone dies next!"

"Was it Potter? Or Malfoy?"

"Why isn't Dumbledore doing anything?"

"SILENCE!" McGonagall barked loudly. The room quieted, and the students immediately turned their attention back to their Head of House.

"I'm afraid we have not found the identity of the Heir of Slytherin," McGonagall admitted. "We have precious few clues. However, the victims of the Heir will be revived within two months. Take whatever comfort you can from that."

The room exploded into excited chatter again. McGonagall tried to calm them, to no avail. She sighed and stepped down from the stairs, exiting the Common Room. The conversation died down to a dull roar, and the students began to make their way up to their dormitories, still whispering excitedly. Hermione sighed. She made her way towards the stairs, but she was stopped. Fred and George Weasley, along with Seamus Finnegan and Neville Longbottom, were eyeing her suspiciously.

"What do you want?" she asked exasperatedly, even though she already knew.

The normally mischievous glint in the eyes of the twins was gone. Their matching blue eyes were cold and hard. "What do you know about what happened to Ron?" George asked finally.

Hermione tried to look innocent, but apparently it wasn't very convincing. "I don't know anything except for what Professor McGonagall told me. I'm as surprised as you are, though I can't say truthfully that it hurts."

Fred's eyes narrowed. "You're lying. You didn't look surprised at all when McGonagall made the announcement. You already knew what happened, and you didn't say anything."

Hermione stayed silent, biting her lip.

"Spill it, Hermione," Seamus said coldly. Hermione winced. She knew the Irish boy had been a friend with both of the Petrified Gryffindors. Neville was looking at her accusingly as well.

"Alright," she conceded, "I knew."

"That's all?" Fred asked suspiciously. "I doubt you would have kept it from us if that was all." George nodded in agreement.

"Ginny knows," she said, trying to distract them. She was not going to betray Harry. Merlin knew what the twins would do to him, even if he was innocent. Weasley's were in general very protective of their kin, one thing that made the ostracizing of Ginny all the more surprising and bothersome.

"She found out before I did."

"And that means what?" George asked nastily, not distracted in the least.

"You're hiding something," Fred said. It wasn't a question.

Hermione bit harder on her lip, trying desperately to keep quiet. "Let me go," she said clearly. The twins didn't move.

"It was Potter, wasn't it?" Fred said, fury burning in his eyes. "You know, and you are protecting him."

"NO!" Hermione cried. "He's innocent! He didn't do it!"

The twins, Neville, and Seamus all looked surprised at her outburst. "But you do know something," Fred said, recovering his composure.

"Maybe I do," Hermione admitted. "But I'm not telling you."

"Damnit Granger!" George exclaimed, making Hermione jump back. "We're only trying to protect our family! If Harry's involved in this then Ginny needs to get away from him!"

"You'll never get her to do that," Hermione said, hoping what she said was true. She'd confronted the nearly hysterical girl, and told her what had really happened. Truth be told, she hadn't needed that much convincing. It was just ridiculous for Harry to be the one attacking people. Ginny had wanted to go apologize, but Hermione thought it best they both had time to collect themselves. It had probably been a good idea.

"Do you think we don't know that?" Percy Weasley asked, walking over. "They are very close, and Ginny's as stubborn as Mum. But if we have to, we'll do it. Family is important to us." He looked in Hermione's eyes, and she saw nothing but grim determination behind the Prefect Weasley's glasses.

"If that's true," Hermione found herself saying coldly, "then why did you pretend she didn't exist for over two months."

"Because we were stupid!" George exclaimed. "Because we let our bias against Slytherins get in the way of family."

"We're sorry about that, Hermione," Fred said. He certainly did look sorry. "But we need to know."

"Do these two need to know?" Hermione asked skeptically, waving her hand at Neville and Seamus. If she was going to spill the beans on Harry, she wanted to make sure it was to as few people as possible. Seamus glared at her, but turned and walked away. Neville looked somewhat fearful as he also left.

"Alright, they're gone. Spill."

Hermione took a deep breath. "You will not repeat this to anyone, understand?"

Fred glared at her. "That's for us to decide."

"I mean students," Hermione clarified. "Dumbledore, McGonagall; they already know."

"What do you mean?" Percy demanded. "How can they know and not have done anything?"

"Because there is nothing to do," Hermione explained.

"You aren't making any sense!" George cried, throwing his hands up in the air.

"You won't tell a soul?" Hermione tried again. Percy frowned, but nodded. The twins looked at each other, and nodded grimly.

"I mean it," Hermione warned them. "Ginny will never forgive you if you tell."

"SPILL IT." Fred growled.

Hermione took a deep breath. "Silencio," she cast. Once she was certain they wouldn't be overhead, she told them what they wanted, hoping that Harry would forgive her. It was obvious that this had nothing to do with a grudge against Harry. This was a family seeking to ensure the safety of its members. Hermione didn't have the heart to say no.

"All right...Professor McGonagall and I found Harry standing over Ron and Dean's bodies...but he didn't do it!" she exclaimed quickly as their faces darkened.

"How can you be sure?" Percy snapped. "How do you know he wasn't just acting?"

"Because he's my friend! I know him!" Hermione cried, tears beginning to run down her face. "He'd never do that!"

"He didn't exactly get along with Ron," George pointed out.

"She's right," Percy said abruptly. The twins nearly got whiplash as they spun around to face their brother, disbelieving looks on their faces.

"What?"

"It doesn't make sense," Percy declared. "Potter's friends with the Muggleborn, Turpin. It doesn't make sense that he would have attacked her."

"So what?" George said. "What the bloody hell was he doing if he wasn't guilty?"

"He found them," Hermione protested. "He was sleeping in the Dormitory."

"Are you sure about that?" George asked.

Hermione was fighting her tears now, trying to stay coherent enough to argue on her friend's behalf.

"No, I can't be. But unless he's been fooling me, his best friend for two years, there is no way that he is the Heir of Slytherin."

George frowned. "Then why was he there? Why didn't he go for help?"

"Because I wasn't the first person to find him."

"Ginny?" Fred asked.

Hermione nodded. "She accused him of betraying her, of hurting her brother. He was kind of in shock..."

Percy nodded. "Thank you, Hermione," he said earnestly, not a trace of his normal pomposity was showing in his voice. "We needed to hear that. And we will not say anything, right you two?"

The twins nodded gravely. "Sorry, Hermione," Fred said, stepping aside. Hermione didn't even acknowledge it as she tore up the stairs, wanting to bury herself in her pillow.

Harry had taken the news that the Weasley's knew with...well, little reaction. It hadn't helped his mood much, but he hadn't been angry with Hermione, and he'd understood when she'd explained the full context. Ginny had been rather subdued about her brothers harassing Hermione, and it didn't help matters when the three remaining Weasley's yanked Ginny away for a talk. The look on Harry's face was that of absolute helplessness.

Hermione glanced up from her seat beside Harry in Potions and took in his appearance. He obviously hadn't slept well, if he'd slept at all. Something was definitely bothering him, and it wasn't just the suspicious looks and frightened whispers that accompanied him wherever he went. He was making mistakes he'd never made, including the error he'd just made by adding the wrong ingredient. The Hellbore was supposed to be added *after* the Gallwood.

“Harry!” Hermione snapped at him. He cursed and quickly added a drop of Knotgrass extract, which counteracted the Hellbore, and calmed the bubbling, which had began after he’d added the wrong ingredient. Harry breathed a sigh of relief, and then rapped himself on the head with his knuckles.

“I recommend that you cease abusing yourself, Potter,” Snape said as he approached a hint of amusement in his voice. “An admirable job of fixing your mistakes, but I will not award points, as you shouldn’t have made it in the first place. Perhaps Miss Granger might pay more attention,” he commented icily. Hermione tried to prevent her anger from showing. Snape sneered and moved on.

“He could have taken points,” Harry pointed out when he was past. “The fact that he didn’t shows that we’re on his good side.”

“Maybe *you* are,” Hermione replied, “but I’m a Gryffindor.”

“Exactly,” Harry said, “you are a Gryffindor, and he didn’t take points.”

Hermione frowned, and then realized what he was saying actually made sense. Harry’s expression dimmed a little. “I’m sorry for the making the mistake in the first place.”

“It’s fine, Harry,” Hermione said. “But is something bothering you?”

Harry sighed. “It’s nothing, Hermione,” he said, completely unconvincingly.

“Have you at least written Daphne about it?” Hermione pressed on nervously. She knew she was treading on dangerous territory; Harry was very protective of his privacy. Still, he normally told her things.

“Yes,” he said simply, peering over the instructions. “Spoonful of newt eggs, Hermione,” he read off. Hermione performed her task, and he added them to the potion, which turned bright green. Harry immediately began stirring the cauldron, following the instructions with his normal precision.

“What did she say?” Hermione whispered, making sure they were not overheard. She realized that what she was asking could be

interpreted to mean whatever unknown thing was bothering him or what happened when he came upon the victims of the last attack.

“She said that she’s worried, and that she wants me to write her back if I see anything else suspicious. Happy?” Harry managed to say this with coolness, rather than irritation or anger. Harry didn’t tend to get really angry with her. Hermione wasn’t sure if she preferred the way he handled things; it made it more difficult to know how much she’d upset him.

“Sorry, Harry,” Hermione said in the most apologetic tone she could muster. “I’m just a bit worried about you. I care about you, Harry; you can’t blame me for wondering what’s wrong.”

Harry sighed. “Beetle shells,” he said in a flat voice. Hermione handed over the ingredients, and Harry added them. “No, I can’t,” he said, turning back to her. “I’ll admit, this whole thing has bothered me a bit. I’m just...well, I’m just scared that you or Ginny will be next. With the exception of Mrs. Norris, the people attacked have had some association with me.”

“It’s only been three people,” Hermione pointed out. “But I understand your concern.” Hermione frowned, frustrated. “I just wish I could find out what was doing it!”

Harry sighed again. “Juniper Grass.” Hermione used her tweezers to extract the exact amount, and Harry carefully added it to the cauldron, stirring vigorously.

He turned back to her as the potion boiled. Hermione absently adjusted the temperature. “I know you do, Hermione, but you’ve gone through the entire library. We’ve found only two ways of petrifying a person...well, really only one. There’s the ritual, which is time-consuming and requires the presence of more than one adult wizard or witch, and that Ancient Curse of Medusa, which is really just an altered Body-Bind.”

Hermione nodded. She’d been hopeful when she’d found a reference to ‘magicks of the stone men’ in a very old book of Ancient Greek and Roman wizardry, a book she’d actually needed to send Ginny’s brother Bill to translate. She hadn’t sent the actual book, of course;

Madam Pince would skin her alive and use her hide to hold some of the disintegrating books together. She'd copied pertinent sections using a Charm that Flitwick had taught her. She'd been relieved, any mistakes in the hand-written copy might have changed the meaning of words entirely.

Bill worked as a Curse-Breaker for Gringotts and dealt with ancient languages on a regular basis. Because the Romans had occupied Egypt for a time, Bill was familiar enough with the language, even if the majority of what he dealt with involved Ancient Egyptian wizards.

Bill had been very concerned about the attacks and was sure to be even more alarmed after Ginny had sent Bill a letter detailing what had happened to Ron. Ginny's parents had as well, but they weren't as well informed. Ginny had, of course, neglected to mention Harry's role in the whole thing.

As for the text, the reference had been erroneous. What Bill had found was a reference to the Curse of Medusa, which supposedly turned a person to stone. It didn't actually work that way, of course. Hermione had been, needless to say, rather disappointed.

They turned in their potion, which was acceptable, though not up to their normal standards. Hermione packed her books and turned to her partner, who was doing the same.

"Harry, Ginny's going to be a bit late to lunch. She said she was working on a letter to her brother, Bill."

"Sounds good," Harry replied absently. "We've got the rest of the afternoon off, don't we?"

"Yes, I guess we do," Hermione said. She'd forgotten that Professor Flitwick had taken ill, and canceled Charms. And Professor Lockhart was in the process of rebuilding his classroom after a few errant spells had turned the place into a war zone. He could hold the class somewhere else, of course, but Lockhart probably preferred not to teach at all, if he could help it.

They went to lunch, sitting at the Slytherin table. Daphne Greengrass had given up expressing her displeasure at having a Muggleborn sit with them, but Pansy Parkinson continued to blatantly turn her nose up at her, expressing her distaste. Hermione ignored her. After lunch, Ginny joined them and the three went into the deserted classroom off of the Entrance Hall.

"Well, we're still stuck, I suppose," Ginny began.

"I can't find *anything*," Hermione replied. She was shocked that the Hogwarts Library had failed her. Even with access to the Restricted Section, she had nothing. It was very much bothering her.

Harry looked thoughtful. Then his green eyes lit up. "What is it, Harry?" Hermione asked excitedly. *Maybe he's finally figured something out!*

"Wait a second, work this through with me," Harry asked. Hermione nodded.

"Alright," he began, "we're dealing with the Heir of Slytherin, are we not?"

"Yes," Ginny replied impatiently. "But I don't see what this has to do with what we're talking about...besides the obvious, of course."

"Well," Harry continued. "What was the animal that Slytherin was associated with?"

"A snake," Hermione said. Suddenly the consequences of what Harry was saying began to sink in.

"And he was also a Parselmouth, right?" Ginny piped in.

"Yeah, he was. Wouldn't it make sense for it to be some kind of snake? Something that only he could control?" Harry reasoned.

"Oh, Merlin," Hermione breathed. Suddenly, she remembered something she was reading. "Basilisk!"

"What?"

"A Basilisk!" Hermione cried. "I remember now, '*the King of Serpents...a rooster's cry is fatal to it...gaze brings death...*'" Hermione noticed that Harry winced when she mentioned the roosters, but his attention was riveted on what she said.

"Can you show us the book?"

Hermione groaned. "I've got to find it again, I don't remember where."

The bell rang, and Ginny cursed. "I've got to go to class. Good luck!" The small redhead ran out the door.

"Well, that leave us then," Hermione said brightly. "Come on, Harry."

Harry yawned, and for the first time, Hermione noticed the dark spots under his eyes. "You didn't sleep well last night, did you?" Combined with his sub par performance in Potions, it was obvious that he was in need of rest.

"No, I didn't," Harry admitted.

"I'll be fine on my own. Go get some rest."

"Alright," Harry said, shrugging. He left, and Hermione made straight for the library.

She entered the library, and headed for Madam Pince's desk. The thin woman looked up at her. "I suppose you'll be wanting access to the Restricted Section?"

"Yes," Hermione replied simply.

"Very well, here is the key. I trust you will not abuse it," she said sternly. Hermione nodded quickly. She sighed, and handed the keys over. Hermione tried to avoid snatching them, and calmly held her hands out.

Walking towards the Restricted Section, Hermione saw Terry Boot sitting lazily on an armchair, a book on his hand. He didn't appear to be reading it very closely, though. "Hello Terry," she called over. The

dark-haired boy glanced up, his blue eyes lazily looking around to see who had addressed him.

"Hello Hermione," he replied pleasantly. He eyed the keys in her hand. "The Restricted Section?"

"Yes," Hermione replied, then realized she might be able to use this situation to her benefit. "Terry, would you mind helping me research something. It's related to Lisa."

The Ravenclaw boy looked up interestedly. Hermione knew that the two were good friends. "Something about the Heir of Slytherin? Do you know what attacked Lisa?"

"Maybe," Hermione admitted. "I'm double-checking a reference that I saw earlier. If I'm right, we might have a major problem...not that we don't already."

Terry nodded in understanding. "Let's get to work then."

Hermione unlocked the door to the Restricted Section, and closed it behind them. It was empty, fortunately enough. She put her things down, and turned to her new research partner. "Alright, Terry, what we're looking for is information about Basilisks."

The dark-haired boy's eyes bulged. "A *Basilisk*?" he breathed.

Hermione nodded. "You see why this is a problem."

The two began searching through the many books. About a half-hour later, Hermione found what she was looking for. Then she paused. She needed to get this information to Harry, all of it, but she could carry this book out with her. *Madam Pince is going to kill me...*

She ripped the page out of the book, closed it, and replaced it on the shelf. "I've got it," she said to Terry. "We need to find our way back immediately, and alert Dumbledore. There's nothing else it could be."

Terry nodded, quickly restored the various volumes he'd been examining to the shelves, and hurried out of the Restricted Section,

locking the door. "I always knew you should have been a Ravenclaw, Hermione," he commented.

"No time for that now...Parvati!"

For some reason, the gossip Gryffindor Second Year was actually doing homework in the library, and glanced up. "Yes Hermione?"

"I need to borrow your mirror," Hermione said quickly. This was the only thing she could think of to possibly survive an encounter with the King of Serpents. Now that she knew what she was up against, she needed to be prepared.

"Why Hermione?" Lavender asked. "You've never been concerned about your appearance before." She said this innocently, but Hermione was no idiot, and knew what she was really saying. Not that she cared.

"I need it for a spell," Hermione lied. Parvati sighed and handed it to her. She grabbed it, Terry's hand, and ran out of the library.

"I'm guessing we'll look around corners with that," Terry said when they were out of earshot. "And did you really *tear out* the page of a book? Madam Pince is going to kill you."

"I know that Terry, but it's not important. We need to find Harry, and then go to Dumbledore. Harry's sleeping in the Slytherin Dormitory, but I have the Password."

"You do?" Terry exclaimed, looking at her in amazement. "I suppose one of those two told you."

"No," Hermione deadpanned, "Draco Malfoy had a change of heart and decided to help me out. I'm his mistress now in return...*of course they gave it to me!*" she hissed.

As they walked down the darkened Second Floor Corridor, Hermione peered around. The few candles cast eerie shadows on the walls. It was raining heavily outside, so very little light came from the windows. As they were about to round a corner, Hermione heard something that froze her blood.

She heard hissing. Hissing that she'd only heard once before; when Harry had spoken to the snake at the Dueling Club. "Terry! Stop!"

Terry just managed to throw up the mirror to peer around when he let out a gasp. Hermione watched in horror as his body stiffened and he crashed forward, out of sight. She began to back up nervously. A huge shadow of a massive snake was now showing on the wall. *Merlin, I'm going to die!*

There was more hissing, and the shadow stopped. Another shadow joined it, one of a short man. Hermione's eyes followed it as it drew closer to her line of sight. The figure turned the corner, and came to a stop, facing her.

Hermione felt the blood drain from her face and strangled the cry that threatened to escape her.

Harry was standing there.

Harry, with his black Hogwarts robes and Slytherin crest, untamable black hair and holly and phoenix feather wand...that was pointed directly at her.

There was one crucial difference however...or two, depending on the way one looked at it. Rather than a vibrant emerald green, Harry's eyes were glowing red slits. The corners of his mouth were upturned into an evil grin. He laughed softly, a cold, high laugh that most certainly didn't belong to her best friend.

"Harry?" she gasped. It can't be...it can't be...he can't be the Heir of Slytherin...you would have seen something...you would have known...he's Harry Potter...he grew up with an Auror...it can't be...I'm dreaming, I must be...

All of these thoughts went through Hermione's brain as she stared at the hideous and terrifying demon that had once been her closest companion.

"Hello Hermione," the demon hissed and again laughed softly at her horrified gasp. "I'm afraid you've discovered a bit too much, girl."

Hermione backed away in terror. "Harry...you don't have to do this..."

Harry laughed coldly. *"You still don't understand. I am not Harry. I am Tom Riddle."*

Hermione's eyes widened. *No...no, that can't be true...Tom's helpful and clever; he isn't this...this...*

"...Monster?" he offered. *"I take offense to that, but I am indeed what has loosed the Serpent of Slytherin upon the squib's cat, the Mudblood, the two half-bloods, and the Muggle-loving fool."*

"You can't be..." she repeated.

"Yes, Hermione, I can be," he mocked. *"But my time grows short. Your friend is fighting me...losing, of course, but still fighting. He cares a great deal for you and the blood traitor...sickening, what he feels for you."*

He took a step forward, his crimson eyes burning with inner fury. *"I'm afraid we must finish this now. You should feel honored. I've never spoken to a victim before. Of course, you will be the first to die, so it won't matter."*

Hermione's hand plunged into her robes. She backed away, leveling her wand and trying to calm her shaking body. "Stay away from me," she warned in a quavering voice.

"Run, Hermione. Run," Riddle whispered, laughing madly.

He fired a blue curse at her, which she dodged. It flew past her and melted the stone as it contacted the wall behind her. He raised his wand again, and she ran down the corridor, away from Riddle and his basilisk. She ran down the hallway...then abruptly slammed into an invisible barrier. She fell backwards, hitting the floor hard.

She scrambled around for her wand as Riddle calmly walked down the corridor, twirling Harry's wand absently in his fingertips. She tried to pull herself to her feet, and stood up shakily.

“Dear, dear...I’m afraid that Harry will miss you deeply...but I’m saddened to say that you know too much. Knowledge can be deadly, you see?”

Hermione raised her wand, but knew she didn’t have a chance.

“Mentis Mortis!” he cried. Hermione watched helplessly as a jet of yellow light flew straight at her...

Then she knew no more.

Chapter 17: Legacy of the Founders

“...*Harry...Harry...*”

“*Harry, wake up!*”

Harry woke slowly to the voice of a frightened-sounding girl whispering in his ear. He opened his eyes and saw Ginny standing next to him. Her face pale, and tears were sliding down her cheeks.

“Ginny?” Harry mumbled sleepily. “What’s wrong?”

“*Hermione*,” Ginny explained quickly, “she’s been attacked.”

The words were easily as effective as a bucket of freezing water; Harry’s eyes flew open and he began moving immediately. He put his diary in his pocket absently, and then packed away the rest of his belongings.

Harry slid on his trainers and began walking quickly. “Hospital Wing?” he asked. Ginny nodded.

“She was found with Terry Boot...he’s Petrified...but she’s...*not*,” Ginny mumbled.

“What’s wrong with her?” Harry asked. He was almost afraid to know.

“I don’t know,” Ginny admitted. “Professor Snape found me; he was actually a bit spooked about it. But he didn’t mention *what* she was hit with.”

“*Hit with?*” Harry said, stopping in his tracks. “As in with a curse?”

Ginny nodded grimly. “Like I said, she wasn’t Petrified.”

They hurried up towards the Hospital Wing, Ginny clinging to Harry’s hand as if for dear life. Obviously, the attack on their best friend had hit the young redhead very hard indeed. They reached the stairs and climbed up to the landing. Taking a deep breath, Harry shoved the door open.

The Hospital Wing was brightly lit, even with the dark and dreary weather. Harry saw Hermione's hair from one of the cots on the far end of the Hospital Wing. The Headmaster, Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape were clustered around her, along with Madam Pomfrey.

"How is she?" Harry asked. Snape turned around.

"Potter, Weasley," he said by way of greeting. "We are rather fortunate, actually. Unless I am seriously mistaken, she was hit with the Mind Death Curse."

Harry's blood ran cold. He had heard of the curse, it was a favorite among Voldemort's most sadistic Death Eaters. It caused excruciating mental anguish while forcing the victim to relive their most frightening fears. It also slowly shut down the mind, causing a long, slow, painful death.

"I wouldn't be quite as concerned as you are, Potter," Snape said. "Fortunately, a number of techniques for treating victims of the curse were developed towards the end of the First War. Granger will survive."

"Not only that, Mister Potter," Madam Pomfrey commented, "but she'll be fully on the road to recovery by midnight. The Curse was so popular among the Death Eaters that the Ministry went to great lengths to find a way to combat it. Miss Granger has been given a number of special Mind Healing potions and spells, and will probably suffer more damage from her fall and subsequent head injury than the Curse."

"I don't understand," Harry said, confused. "Why is it so disturbing that someone used a curse that is easy to counter nowadays?"

Snape glared at him. "Because, Potter, it means that it is something from the *past* that has been attacking people. Any idiot capable of performing the Curse knows that it is useless in this setting."

"Severus, I believe you are being a bit rude," Dumbledore cut in.

Harry smiled as Dumbledore intervened; he was not in the mood to argue with his Head of House. Regardless of what Madam Pomfrey and Snape said, he was still worried about the state of his best friend.

Then Dumbledore's smile faded. His clear blue eyes moved slowly behind their half-moon glasses, and bore straight into Harry. Harry felt a sharp pain behind his eyes. Something stirred in his subconsciousness. He blinked.

Dumbledore's twinkle was completely gone. He was now looking at Harry with a mixture of shock and sadness. "Harry, turn over your wand, if you would," he said gravely. Both McGonagall and Snape spun around, mouths open. Snape turned slowly to stare at Harry, who was feelingly extremely nervous all of a sudden.

Ginny gaped. "What? Why do you want him to turn over his wand? You don't think..." she trailed off, staring at Harry in absolute horror.

"Harry, your wand," Dumbledore said again, more firmly this time. Harry limply withdrew the wand from his holster and held it out. Snape snapped it away from him, staring at it with a strange mix of curiosity and disgust. Harry swallowed.

"I don't understand," he said thickly. "I've done nothing. I'd *never* hurt Hermione."

Dumbledore took the wand from Snape, who relinquished it only reluctantly. McGonagall continued to stand off to the side, her mouth agape. "I believe you, Mr. Potter. But it is not you whom I am concerned about..."

"*Priori Incantato*," he whispered reluctantly, as if it was the last thing in the world he wanted to do.

Harry blacked out.

Ginny watched in stark horror as a blinding yellow light emerged from the tip of Harry's wand. It struck the wall, and when the light faded, it left a symbol of some sort. It was a glowing yellow skull, framed by two lightning bolts. From the gasps of McGonagall and Madam

Pomfrey, the fear and disbelief on Snape's face, and the grave expression on Dumbledore's face, Ginny realized that it could be only one thing.

Harry *had* cast the Mind Death Curse.

Harry *was* the Heir of Slytherin

Tom Marvolo Riddle knew the game was up as he opened his eyes. It had taken him a long time, but Dumbledore had finally put the clues together.

No matter. He had been planning to execute his final plan for a month now. And standing beside him was the perfect target.

Tom gathered his coils of darkness and enveloped the blue light of Harry's consciousness, crushing it and beating it into submission. He bound and trussed it and shoved it into the very back of Harry's mind, into the mental prison he had so painstakingly constructed. He stripped Harry of all control, mental, physical, everything. He knew the consequences of his action. But he was about to do something that, if Potter was capable of resisting, would probably allow him to break Tom's hold and regain control of his body. At this stage, Tom could not afford that.

The consequence of this action was that Daphne Dressler now knew her adopted son was in danger. He could feel the ring's magic pulsing, sending waves of energy towards the distant Dressler Manor. Soon her own ring would burn, and she would travel to Hogwarts *very* quickly.

Riddle chuckled quietly as he heard the gasps and intakes of breath from the assembled wizards and witches. He also heard a scream of terror from the small redhead standing beside him. *Ah, time to begin...*

Without warning, he seized Ginny's arms and twisted them behind her. He secured her against him, preventing any chance of escape, and using her as a shield against the others. Snape stared, open-mouthed, at the shade of his former master. He didn't even react

when the wand in his hand soared through the air, landing in Riddle's outstretched palm. He forced Ginny's head upward, exposing the column of her throat. He twisted his right arm around, pointing the wand tip at Ginny's throat. The girl whimpered in terror. The Professors were frozen.

"Tom," Dumbledore spat with disgust, "let them go. This is between us."

"You think me a fool, do you, Dumbledore? I believe that I have the advantage in this situation."

"Headmaster, what..?" Snape began.

Tom sneered at him. *"Hello, Severus."*

"What..?"

"I suppose I don't know you," Tom admitted. *"Not that that matters. One day, you will kneel at my feet...though I'm not sure if it's appropriate to call it the past or to call it the future..."*

"Fight him, Harry," Dumbledore implored, sending waves of Legillimacy at him to aid the boy's mental resistance. But Tom channeled his power, drawing on the combined strength of his host and the power imbued within the diary that resided in his pocket.

"He cannot hear you, Dumbledore," Tom taunted. *"His mind is incapacitated; I have full control now."* He pulled Ginny tighter to his body, eliciting a moan of pain from the eleven-year old. For that he yanked her hair. The trembling girl was obviously terrified. *"Quiet, girl."* She shut up immediately, but continued to shake with fright.

"Let her go, Tom," Dumbledore implored him again. *"She is nothing to you."*

Tom laughed. *"She is everything to me, Dumbledore."*

Dumbledore drew his wand. *"Release him, Tom,"* he commanded. Tom adjusted so that Ginny was now shielding him from any attack. *"Go ahead, Dumbledore, kill her. Then I'll be all yours."*

Tom laughed as Dumbledore did nothing. Severus was slowly raising his wand, taking careful aim. Tom waved his wand, focusing his magic. The Hogwarts Potions Professor was hurled backward and slammed into the wall. *“Don’t try to sneak up on me, Severus,”* he warned. McGonagall had raised her own wand, but could not bring it upon her self to cast anything that could break through a basic Shielding Charm without harming Ginny.

“I’m afraid I must be going, Dumbledore. We shall meet again.”

Tom sent a burst of Legillimacy at the youngest Weasley, and she went limp in his arms. Clutching her to his side with one arm, he hurled his free arm in the direction of the floor, sending forth a massive burst of magical energy.

He was already moving when it hit the ground.

The resulting blast knocked back all four adults and blew a massive hole in the floor of the Hospital Wing. Minerva coughed as she inhaled the smoke and small debris. Dumbledore cast something, and the air cleared.

Her heart stopped in her chest.

Harry and Ginny were gone.

Tom Marvolo Riddle knew as well as anyone that the sight of the Boy-Who-Lived with crimson eyes and carrying an unconscious girl over his shoulders would be a cause for alarm. It was one of the reasons that he’d risked detection a bit longer before waking Harry up after attacking Boot and the Mudblood. Not only was the Diary, his power source, in his pocket, but so was Potter’s Invisibility Cloak.

He stopped outside the Hospital Wing, shifted the girl’s weight, and flung the cloak over himself. It magically expanded to cover both of their bodies. A few Silencing Charms later, Tom Riddle could move through the school undetected. He removed the ring and placed it in his pocket. The damage was done.

He moved quickly, knowing that he had precious little time to prepare. He reached the Second Floor Corridor. However, as he did so, he ran straight into something, and the Cloak slid off. It was the buffoon, Gilderoy Lockhart.

"Mr. Potter..?" he asked in a high-pitched voice.

"I'm afraid you've just witnessed something unfortunate, Gilderoy," Riddle said softly.

"As have you!" he cried, standing up and aiming his wand, in perhaps the most courageous action of his life. He then, of course, proceeded to use the only curse he was remotely proficient in using.

"I've caught you!" he said again. Riddle was shocked by the man's stupidity. *Harry was right. How the bloody hell was this disgrace to purebloods a Slytherin?*

"OBLIViate!" he cried. A grey jet shot from his light. Riddle lazily waved his wand, creating a pale red barrier, a Mental Protection Shield. Normally it was used to deflect mental intrusions via Legillimacy. Because the Memory Charm worked in a similar fashion, it was just as effective.

The grey light struck the barrier and was reflected off it at a much greater velocity. It struck Lockhart in the head, hurling him backwards. He slammed into the far castle wall, and slumped to the floor, unconscious. Riddle smiled. He had just done to Lockhart what he believed the fraud had done to countless others. He'd probably spend the rest of his life in the Permanent Care Ward in St. Mungo's.

He lazily hurled Lockhart's body down the hall, out of sight, and walked into Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. The Mudblood ghost was crying, as she did quite often. She'd been that way when she'd been among the living as well. Riddle pulled the Cloak off, shutting and locking the door behind him. *"I suggest you leave, Mudblood,"* he hissed.

The ghost's eyes widened and she let out a shriek of alarm. She dove into the closest stall, disappearing down a toilet with a splash of water and a shriek. *That was curious,* Tom thought as he stood in front of

the hidden entrance. *I've never seen a ghost that can affect any type of physical substance. Then again, the girl cried enough tears to fill the lake.*

"Open," he hissed in Parseltongue. He smiled as the sinks rearranged themselves before vanishing entirely, revealing the long pipe. "*Descend,*" he hissed next. A platform, floating in midair, slid out of the side wall. *Only a fool would slide down the pipe.* He adjusted the girl's weight again, and stepped onto the platform.

It descended deep into the underground cavern that held the Chamber of Secrets. Tom stepped off it and into a pile of animal bones. He moved quietly through the tunnels, stopping in front of the doors. "*Open,*" he hissed.

The snakes moved and the double-doors slid open revealing the cavernous chamber within. Tom moved quickly now. Time was of the essence.

He lay the girl down at the base of Slytherin's statue, and removed the Diary from his pocket. He bent down and tucked the small book into her arms. Next, he lay down next to her.

He withdrew into Harry's mind. He could still see the blue light struggling, surrounded by serpent-like coils of Darkness. He fed more power into the mental bonds, but not so much as to drain himself and be unable to duel if that was what it came to. He found the link he had created in Harry's mind, and latched onto it. Then he *pushed*.

For the first time in over fifty year, Tom Riddle found himself standing outside the Diary or his host, seeing the world through his own eyes. He looked down, and saw that he appeared to be a ghost of some sort. No matter, he would be gaining enough strength to create a corporeal form soon.

Bending down, he attempted to pick up Potter's wand. His hand passed right through it. Next, he called upon more power from the Diary, nearly draining the massive reserves entirely. His creator had planned for any contingency. He watched, smiling, as his outline grew sharper. Once more, he bent down and reached for the wand. This

time he picked it up and twirled it in his fingers absently, a minor quirk of his.

It was time. He called upon the power of his ancestors, of those who carried within them the blood of Salazar Slytherin, who had discovered this rite.

He stepped back, and aimed at the girl's forehead. He'd have one shot to make this work. But he'd researched this spell with fervor in his past, and even freshened up on it recently in one of his late-night excursions.

He began the wand movements. "*Resurrectio, resurrectio,*" he chanted, moving his arm in a wide arc, cutting down diagonally towards the girl's head. He snapped his wrist upward twice. Next, he traced the outline of the girl's face carefully. She did not stir, fortunate because the slightest movement could mean disaster. The wand tip glowed a brilliant red, then faded to orange, then finally to a blazing yellow.

He touched his glowing wand to the girl's forehead, performing one of the Darkest Magical Rituals in existence.

"*Suus vita est menus vita,*," he said slowly and clearly.

The wand tip glowed, and bright blue tendrils of magical energy began to crackle up the wand into Riddle's form. He smiled and withdrew the wand. He felt his strength building, his senses sharpening. He looked down to see his outline growing clearer with every passing moment.

The Rite of Unwilling Sacrifice was begun.

Minerva McGonagall looked around once more, shock still numbing her body. She saw Severus pick himself off the floor, looking around in disbelief. Albus was already standing, and looked lifeless and grim. "Albus..." she began shakily. "What was that? What's wrong with Harry?"

"It was the Dark Lord, wasn't it, Albus?" Severus sneered. "He's been possessing Potter the entire year, *hasn't he?*"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes," he said gravely.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. Then...

"*Where's Harry?*" a voice snapped.

Minerva turned around to see Daphne Dressler standing there, her face pale and skin drawn tightly, her eyes blazing with an inner fury. Minerva noticed that she was wearing what appeared to be a modified form of Auror Battle Robes. They were lighter, more durable, and shorter than most robes, allowing greater freedom of movement. Normally they were bright red, so as to avoid misidentification in battle; Daphne's were emerald green. "*What took him, Albus?*" she demanded in a shaky voice. "*Why is my ring burning?*"

"Your ring?" Severus asked. "What ring?"

"This ring," she said, thrusting her right hand at him. Severus's eyes narrowed as he recognized it. It was an old Companionship Ring, a pureblood heirloom that was normally given to the eldest son or daughter and his beloved. Daphne had certainly found an alternative use for it.

"Harry has been taken, Daphne," Dumbledore said gravely. "He has been taken by Lord Voldemort."

What little color was left in Daphne's face from her anger vanished. "*What?*" she asked shakily. Minerva thought she was on the verge of a nervous collapse.

"You were right, Daphne," Dumbledore said, closing his eyes. "It appears likely that Harry has been carrying out the attacks on the students and the cat while controlled by a powerful magical object belonging to Tom Marvolo Riddle. It was likely one of his early experiments with immortality...I believe that the object in question is the diary that Harry has been writing in."

"Tom Marvolo Riddle?" Minerva questioned. She had never heard of anyone with that name.

"He was a year ahead of you at Hogwarts, Minerva," Dumbledore said. "A Slytherin Prefect and Head Boy. Very quiet, very shy...at least in public."

Then she remembered him. *Always extremely polite, especially to me.* He'd been among the top students in the school, actually, he had been *the* top student. She'd been a Gryffindor Prefect, and had talked to him. He'd gathered...*followers*, she thought the word fit better than friends. *Avery, Roland and Helga McCourn, Evan Rosier...*

"I remember him," she said. "His...friends were students that went on to serve You-Know-Who!"

Dumbledore looked grave. But it was Daphne who answered the question. "No...they went on to serve *him*," she said, turning to Dumbledore. "Tom Riddle became Lord Voldemort, didn't he?"

"Alas, yes. If you remember correctly, Minerva, he was responsible for Rubeus's expulsion from the school."

Minerva indeed remembered that year. It was the first time the Chamber had been opened, when the school had come to close to closing. After the death of...*what was her name..?*

"Albus, who was it that died last time?" Minerva asked. She had a strange feeling that it might be important."

"Our very own Florence Myrtle."

"That miserable ghost?" Severus asked. "I always thought she drowned in her own tears...or was *dehydrated* by them."

"No," Dumbledore said, ignoring Severus's comment. "She died in the very bathroom where she now resides."

Daphne swallowed hard, and then shook her head. "This is impossible," she said dismissively. "It can't have been the diary. I

detected no traces of Dark Magic. I know Harry lied about where he got it, but there is no way that he's being *possessed* by it."

"If he lied about where he got it, then how do you know *anything* for a fact? I don't think you understand the magnitude of this, Dressler, Severus said softly, but with a hard edge to his voice.

"*What are you talking about, Severus?*" she hissed angrily.

He glared at her. "I'm talking about the fact that if the Dark Lord is embedded enough in Potter's mind to *possess* him, then he doubtless has been influencing his behavior *for the entire year*," he said, slowly and softly. Daphne stared at him.

"For the *entire year*?" she repeated in a daze. "...oh Merlin..." she breathed. "...*how could I have missed it...HOW?*"

Minerva's heart went out to the shell-shocked ex-Auror, but she knew that they had little time to dwell on their mistakes. "Yes, we *all* failed," she admitted. "But we must not dwell on that...Riddle took Miss Weasley with her."

Daphne's head snapped up as if someone had pulled a string. "What?"

"Before you arrived, *which I still not completely sure how you managed*, we had a bit of a *scene*," Severus explained in an icy voice.

"I arrived via Portkey," Daphne said quickly. "What are you talking about?"

Severus sneered. "An *illegal* Portkey, no doubt."

"Yes, *it was*," she admitted through gritted teeth.

Minerva took this time to speak up. "Harry came in here with Miss Weasley to see Miss Granger-"

Daphne's head snapped up again. "What? What's wrong with Hermione?"

"She's been attacked, Daphne, with the Mind Death Curse," Dumbledore said. Daphne took in a breath sharply. "I think it best I tell you the entire story. Harry's behavior has been...erratic for the entire year. He's been acting as if he hadn't gotten much sleep almost every night. I suspected that he was going on nightly excursions. The question was, to *where*?"

"I suppose it would be," Daphne said more to herself than anyone else. "Did you follow him?"

"I could not," Dumbledore said. I could not detect him on any of my instruments, nor could I see his aura. I know why now; it wasn't Harry, it was Tom Riddle."

"...and because your Aura Readers rely on the aura of a specific wizard, you wouldn't be able to track Harry," Daphne finished. "That makes sense."

Minerva thought it was remarkable how calm she was. *Perhaps she is intelligent and logical enough to realize that poorly thought-out action would do little. It is quite admirable, certainly not what one would expect from her. Not after what she's already lost...*

"That is not all," Severus cut in. "After I found Granger and Boot on the Second Floor, I sent Weasley to find Potter. When they returned, Albus...what did you do?" Severus questioned.

Daphne looked at him expectantly. "I used Legillimacy, Daphne. My suspicions had been aroused."

"I understand," Daphne said, taking a deep breath. "What did you see?"

"Absolutely nothing," Dumbledore said. "I was pushed out by a Dark presence. I recognized it immediately. My former pupil leaves a...foul stench of sorts."

"What happened then?" Daphne asked hurriedly.

"Then, Riddle possessed him, seized Weasley, blew that hole in the floor, and fled," Severus summarized. Daphne looked like she was having trouble breathing.

"Thank you, Severus," she said quietly, almost absently. "We got to find them. He's likely seeking to use one or both of their life energies to regain a body."

"Yes, that is what is most likely happening," Dumbledore admitted. "They are obviously in the Chamber of Secrets, but I am afraid I do not know where that is, or what is inside it."

"A brilliant idea, Daphne, but we don't know where the Chamber is, or what's down there. I thought you were a Ravenclaw; don't they normally think things through *before* doing something phenomenally stupid?" Severus commented sharply.

Daphne stiffened. "Fine. You are right about that," she admitted, with audible strain in her voice. Whether it was from admitting that she was being rash or because she was concerned about Harry, it was impossible to determine.

Minerva tuned out the conversation and wandered over to her favorite pupil. The Muggleborn girl was limp and pale, her eyes squeezed tightly shut. Then something caught Minerva's eye. A sheet of paper, rolled up into a ball, was sticking out of the pocket of her shirt. Carefully, Minerva removed it, and unfolded it. Daphne and Severus were arguing about something now.

Minerva laid it flat on the nightstand, and read:

"Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it."

Minerva inhaled sharply. *Surely there isn't a Basilisk down there!*

"I think I know what might be down there," Minerva said finally. "Or rather, Miss Granger did." She handed the page over the Dumbledore, who frowned as he read it.

"Yes, that is hardly surprising. I should have thought of it sooner. It also explains the petrifications; the glare of a basilisk can be 'diluted' if it is not direct," Dumbledore said mostly to him.

Both Severus and Daphne stopped arguing. "There's a *basilisk* in the Chamber of Secrets?" Daphne breathed.

"It appears so," Dumbledore said, pacing around the Hospital Wing. He stared out the window onto the grounds, now illuminated by the evening light. "But we are no closer to finding out where Tom has taken Harry and Ginny."

Daphne was now furiously pacing around the Infirmary. Her face was a mask of concentration, but her eyes betrayed her anxiety. Then she stopped. "Albus, the attacks all took place on the second floor, correct?"

"All except for the attack on Miss Turpin," Dumbledore said. "She was found on the stairs just outside the door."

Daphne started pacing again. "*Where could the entrance be?*" she mumbled to herself. "*Where can Voldemort be assured of privacy, of no one stumbling upon the Chamber? Where does no one ever...go..?*"

She looked up at them, something that looked like hope gleaming in her eyes. "Albus, didn't you say that Moaning Myrtle was the first to die? In her bathroom?"

Albus nodded, his brow furrowed in concentration. "Yes, she was. Do you believe the entrance could be there?"

Daphne shrugged. "It's as likely a place as any."

“Perhaps we should...” Minerva began, but Daphne was already out the door.

Daphne hurtled down the halls of Hogwarts, her gaze fixed straight ahead, trying to fight down the images of Harry’s bloody and mangled body that made her nauseous to contemplate. She cursed her creative imagination, an imagination fed by years of bloody battles and horrific losses.

She was *not* going to lose Harry. She was *not* going to fail Lily.

She ignored the students looking around in confusion. They didn’t matter now.

The Second Floor Corridor was empty and dark; it was not surprising that shade of Lord Voldemort that had possessed her son had attacked Hermione here only hours before. And if she was right, it was also because the entrance was located on this floor.

She walked up to the door to Moaning Myrtles bathroom, but found it locked. There were footsteps behind her, and she glanced up to see that McGonagall, Snape, and Dumbledore had followed her, as she’d expected. She raised her wand, and cast a nonverbal Unlocking Charm. Nothing happened.

“What’s wrong, Daphne?” Snape sneered. “Can’t open the door?”

“It’s locked with a spell, you bloody Death Eater,” she snapped back. She aimed her wand again, and then focused a large part of her power on the lock of the door. She *pushed* with her magic, condensing it and forcing it into the keyhole. There was a crack of metal as the lock was destroyed, and the door swung open.

Daphne hurled it aside, almost taking out Minerva in her haste. The bathroom was as run-down and waterlogged as she remembered it. Moaning Myrtle herself was sitting atop one of the sinks, sobbing loudly.

“Myrtle?” Daphne asked.

The ghost looked up, and then smiled a bit. "Hello, Daphne," she said brightly. "It's nice to see you again." She giggled and drifted over towards her. "You used to cry in here a lot. It was nice having another miserable person in here. I enjoyed the company."

"I had just watched my family killed," Daphne said in a strained voice. She fought down the memories that Myrtle's reminiscences threatened to bring upon her.

"And you're trying to find the only family you have, aren't you?" she asked. Daphne could feel the heat of her companions' gazes on her back. *I don't have time for this...*

"Yes, Myrtle," she said, in as polite a voice she could manage. The ghost was easily offended, and might burst into tears and flee at any moment. But she knew everything that happened in here.

"Oh...well, he walked in here with that redheaded girl," she said. She shivered. "He had red eyes...aren't they green normally?"

Daphne closed her own eyes and fought down the disturbing image and the nausea that accompanied it. The idea of Voldemort desecrating Harry's body, poisoning his mind...it was just too frightening to think about. *Focus*, she instructed herself, reverting to her Auror training. *You have a goal. Accomplish it.*

"Where did he go, Myrtle?" she said. She was surprised to hear the desperation in her voice, and even felt tears in her eyes. Then again, if she looked miserable, it might motivate Myrtle to aid a kindred soul.

"Down the pipe," she said, shivering again. "I've tried to tell people, you know, but he told me I couldn't. But something's wrong with him...and...well...*he's kind of cute...*" the ghost whispered, trailing off. A silvery blush appeared on her cheeks.

Daphne heard a choking noise from behind her. *That would be Snape*, she thought in amusement, a welcome distraction from the panic that was building within her. *I'm not sure I like the idea of a fifty-year old ghost fancying my son, but that's not important...*

"Miss Myrtle?" Minerva's voice asked from behind her. "How did you...well...how did you die?"

Myrtle beamed at the question, something that somehow didn't surprise Daphne. "Ooooh, it was *awful*," she said gleefully. "I came in here because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses...then I heard a voice speaking something, in another language."

Parseltongue, Daphne thought. *Likely spoken by a sixteen year-old Tom Riddle.*

"...but what really got me was that it was a *boy* speaking...so I opened the stall door and told him to go away....then I saw these big, bulging, yellow eyes...and then...*I died*..." she said, shrugging as if she was talking about the weather. *Well, she's had fifty years to get used to it.*

"Where were the eyes?" Daphne asked. Myrtle looked thoughtful.

"They were over there, somewhere," she said finally. "The sinks were gone, I think, but I didn't see much."

That confirms it, then, Daphne thought. *The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is in here, somewhere...*

"Could you be any *more* helpful?" Snape asked sarcastically. His tone had the inevitable effect. Myrtle shrieked a cry and then plummeted into one of the toilets. Daphne turned around. Minerva was glaring at him.

"Severus, why..?"

"Forget it," Daphne interrupted, "she told us everything she knows. Start looking around for the entrance."

It was only a minute before Snape called over. "I may have found it."

Daphne walked over, and peered at the sink that Snape was examining. He pointed with his wand to the pipe that ran into the ground from the basin. Engraved on the brass pipe was a small snake. "I think you have."

"Doubtless, though, the password is in Parseltongue," Dumbledore said. Daphne looked over at him for the first time. His phoenix, Fawkes, was perched on his shoulder, crooning softly. Hanging from his belt was something that Daphne had only seen in history textbooks.

"I recommend you stand back, Daphne," he warned and she backed up to the wall.

Dumbledore raised his wand and Daphne could see his magic exploding around him as he released it into the air. His aura was almost blinding.

"Aufero is obstaculum. Ego dico super vox of meus abbas. Premo thy inimicus."

There was a blinding flash. An enormous burst of crimson energy shot forth, enveloping the sinks. Daphne saw what appeared to be dark green apparitions of serpents writhing in the flood of power. The center of the magic glowed a brilliant gold, expanding rapidly through the entire field. There was a strange, inhuman scream, and the sinks were vaporized. The field collapsed, and Dumbledore staggered, breathing heavily. Minerva ran forward to support him, and he accepted her aid.

He turned to Daphne and Snape, who were staring at him in awe. "As I suspected, Salazar created defenses. If you had attempted to destroy the entrance, your magic would have been reflected and all of us would have been killed. I was able to disable the defenses, because Salazar's life was ended by my ancestors."

"You're a descendent of Godric Gryffindor," Daphne stated simply. "You have the ability to fight Slytherin's magic...and wield that sword."

Dumbledore smiled. Daphne could see wisps of magic flowing from the very walls of Hogwarts back into his frail body. *The wards are replenishing him*, Daphne realized.

"Yes. The sword of Gryffindor is passed from each descendent of the line to the next. When I die, it will be passed to my brother, Aberforth.

From there, it will likely be passed to his wife. He has no children, so it will go to his nephews...unless I choose otherwise."

"Fine sentiments, Headmaster, but we may have two students dying at this very moment," Snape interrupted. But there was still a tone of awe in his voice. Daphne had never seen the magic of a Light Sorcerer before. It was beautiful, intoxicating. *No small wonder that the O'Connor line has been associated with the most powerful wizards of the age for centuries.* Then the rest of Snape's comment registered and panic welled up in Daphne's gut once more.

She stepped towards the cavernous pipe that now occupied the center of the bathroom. Dumbledore put a hand on her shoulder. "You are not going alone, Daphne. I will accompany you." He turned to Minerva and Snape. "You will wait."

"I beg to differ, Headmaster," Snape said angrily. "You are the only thing that stands between me and Azkaban. You are a fool to believe that I will risk that you may not return."

Albus smiled. "I assure you, Severus, that I will. But in any case, I have taken steps to insure that you will never be punished for what you have done in the past."

"Forgive me if I'm skeptical, Headmaster," Snape mumbled, but stepped back.

"You know what to do, Minerva," he said. The Deputy Headmistress nodded. "I will order the students to their dormitories, and inspect the defense...in case you do not succeed, we will be prepared for whatever happens." Daphne thought she saw a tear in her eyes.

"We *are* facing a Basilisk, Daphne," Dumbledore reminded her as she took another step towards the entrance." She nodded without looking at him, and tore the sleeve of her robes. She wrapped it around her head tightly, using the strip of cloth as a makeshift blindfold. She didn't need the use of her eyesight. Her inherited ability would allow her to sense her way around, and her other senses were sharp. She had developed them out of necessity; she couldn't let a Blinding Hex incapacitate her in the heat of battle.

“What about you?” she asked. She pulled the blindfold down to see his response. He was smiling mysteriously. “Another fortunate advantage of my heritage. I am an eighth Demiguise, and thus immune to a Basilisk’s glare.”

“*An eighth Demiguise...*” Snape repeated disbelievingly.

“Yes. They do resembled humans, Severus,” Dumbledore reminded him. “But I shall tell you the full story later. We have wasted too much time already.” The look in the old man’s eyes was one that Daphne had seen once; on the final day of the Siege of Hogwarts, when the Headmaster had harnessed the power of the ancient wards of the castle to an extent that few had ever dreamed of. *The casualties inflicted on the Dragon Masters had nearly driven them into extinction. Scores of Dementors had been quite literally wiped off the face of the earth...*

Daphne snapped out of her memories, cursing her family’s attraction to powerful magic. “We must go,” she said firmly. Dumbledore nodded.

Daphne stepped to the edge of the pipe. Dumbledore waved his wand and a long ladder appeared against the near side of the pit. Daphne took a deep breath and began the descent into darkness.

Chapter 18: Maiden's Test

In the pitch-black darkness of the tunnel, Daphne's lack of sight was entirely unimportant. The blindfold was tied tightly around her head, protecting her from instant death if they were to encounter the Basilisk. *Of course*, she thought as she descended the ladder into the darkness, *I don't know if I'll still be Petrified.*

The air was moist and damp, and stank terribly. Centuries of rotting animal remains, putrid lakewater, and the bacteria that accompanied it made breathing difficult. Daphne thought briefly of using a Bubble-Head Charm, but then realized that it was more trouble than it was worth.

There was one problem with the fact that she couldn't see, though. While Daphne had believed it was a straight drop, it in fact resembled more of a slide than a deep well. Obviously, while a wizard might be able to levitate themselves, the Basilisk also needed a way of reaching the surface. The angle she was now descending at was about thirty degrees to the horizontal, if her estimation was correct.

Dumbledore continued to descend below her. He said that he would warn her when he reached the bottom. Just then, Daphne heard a crunch and stopped moving.

"I have reached the bottom, Daphne," Dumbledore called. "You are about...twenty rungs above me."

Daphne continued her descent. On the twenty-first rung, her booted right foot met resistance and she heard a crunch of bones. "I'm down, Albus," she called over to him. She glanced up and located him immediately. His aura was far too strong to remain hidden from one with the ability to see them. It glowed scarlet and gold, the colors of both his House and his heritage. In the center, Daphne saw a bright blue, a symbol of his sworn allegiance to The Light.

She carefully traversed the pile of animal bones and managed to avoid picking up a layer of grime. Following Dumbledore's aura into a long tunnel, Daphne focused on her other senses. She could hear sloshing sounds, likely from the lake that was either overhead or close to it. Water dripped down from crevices in the ceiling. She also

heard an occasional crack of a small rock breaking loose and rolling across the floor.

The only thing she could smell was the foul stench of the tunnel. Her sense of touch revealed little that would help her navigate; it told her that she was in a damp, cool cave, nothing more.

“Ah, it seems this may pose quite a problem, but I think you can remove your blindfold, Daphne,” Dumbledore called out.

Daphne pulled the strip of cloth onto her forehead and gaped at the massive, forty-foot long snakeskin that Dumbledore was studying. Her fear for Harry’s safety increased ten-fold.

“I’ve seen Basilisks before,” Dumbledore said, stroking his beard, “but never of this size. And the Monster of Slytherin is far older, and likely larger than even this skin. I highly suspect that it is within the Chamber itself.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Daphne said reluctantly. “We need to go.”

They proceeded down the winding pipes, and Daphne quickly determined that she’d missed very little while unable to see. The pipes were long, dark and cavernous. Emerging into an antechamber, Daphne sucked in a breath as she caught sight of what was undoubtedly the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets.

The entrance was comprised of two ornate double doors, engraved with elaborate likenesses of serpents and strange carvings across the bottom of both doors. A large ‘S’ was emblazoned on each door. The locking mechanism was a pair of interlocking snakes with jeweled green eyes. Dumbledore studied the door carefully. “I fear we may need Parseltongue to open this door as well,” he admitted, stroking his beard once more.

“Can you overcome the defenses?” she asked, studying the carvings. She furrowed her brow in concentration. “These are Ancient Runes,” she commented, tracing her fingers across them. She recognized the style. “Of a Gaelic design.”

“Indeed?” Dumbledore asked, peering in at the markings.

Daphne examined the markings, tracing her wand along the runes. She'd seen most of them before. "It's something involving blood," she concluded. She recognized *that* pattern. Ancient Runes had hardly been her best subject, but she'd found the class intriguing and her marks had been decent.

Dumbledore frowned in disgust. "I should have suspected this. Dark Wizards believe in this form of blood magic, involving a *sacrifice* of blood. Tom is clearly no different than his ancestor."

"I think that's what it is," Daphne said, crouching down to get a better look. "Yes," she concluded. Dumbledore moved closer.

"I believe you are correct. It says '*Enter only ye who speak the tongue of serpents or give blood untouched by commoners.*'"

"In other words," Daphne concluded. "Muggles."

She drew a short knife from her boot and slashed across her hand. She hissed at the pain, but pressed her bleeding palm onto the markings. There was a click and whirr of mechanisms; she pulled back, healing the cut on her palm with a quick spell.

They watched as the engraved serpents began to move, rearranging themselves on the doors. Finally, the interlocked snakes that were holding the massive doors together slid apart and the doors slowly swung open.

Daphne took a step inside the fabled Chamber of Secrets.

The cavern was well lit, likely by magical means, as the few torches and candles that she could see certainly couldn't provide the illumination to brighten the entire Chamber. The structure was comprised of a long stone path, which emptied out into a semi-circular, high-ceilinged chamber. Along the edges of the path were enormous golden serpents with green eyes, carved with exquisite detail. Below the rearing statues were hundreds of smaller golden snakes.

The main chamber was dominated by a goliath likeness of Salazar Slytherin, from the looks of it, carved out of solid granite. While the

entire Chamber had been sculpted by magical means, it was obvious that the founder of Slytherin House had spared no expense in creating this majesty hidden far beneath the castle.

But Daphne cared little for the architecture. She sped up her pace and heard Dumbledore advancing cautiously behind her. She could hear the faint hum of Phoenix song, and knew Fawkes had joined them. The only sounds she could hear besides that were their footsteps, along with the occasional faint clink of the Sword of Gryffindor against the Headmaster's belt buckle.

She advanced quickly, clearing the long path in less than fifteen seconds. As she reached the end, her eyes locked onto the two still figures lying sprawled on the ground in a shallow puddle of water in front of the granite effigy.

Harry was lying on his stomach with his head turned towards her. His skin was pale, and his eyes were closed tightly. He was covered in grime, but appeared otherwise unharmed. Ginny was lying foot or so away, on her side. Her arms were tucked tightly around her. Her red hair was fanned out like a halo. A lump rose in her throat as the sight brought back memories of Lily's pale and limp form, her lifeless arms clutched around the boy that she had grown to love as her own son.

She heard Dumbledore's footsteps growing louder as he caught up with her. The humming of Fawkes grew clearer, and she felt a weight lifted from her heart for a brief second. Then, a flicker of movement caught her eye.

Where before there had been empty air, a ghostlike apparition of a boy in his late teens had appeared. He was tall and solidly built, with neatly combed black hair and dark eyes. He wore simple Hogwarts robes, evidence that the style worn today had remained unchanged for at least half a century. A pair of badges shone on his right breast; one golden with a large 'P' and the other a silver shield marked with a serpent. The boy would have been quite handsome, but for his facial expression: a vicious sneer.

It was unlike any ghost Daphne had ever seen, and from the faded and washed out colors, she knew that this was indeed the shade of Tom Marvolo Riddle, preserved in his Diary for over fifty years.

Anger rose up in her; a storm of howling rage that made her blood pound in her veins. Her fury burned within her like an unquenchable firestorm, one that would indiscriminately obliterate everything in its path. Her magic pounded against its restraints, seeking to be unleashed upon the object of her hatred.

She didn't even remember raising her wand. She didn't remember calling upon her magic, compressing it and funneling the roiling and crackling energies into her mahogany and blue phoenix feather wand. She *certainly* didn't remember speaking the word that had not escaped her lips for over ten years.

"Crucio."

Had her mind been functioning, she would have thought better of her actions, but the vengeance that her fury demanded overrode all other thoughts. As the logical part of her mind would have guessed, the cracking zigzag of fiery white light passed through the incorporeal shade, striking the wall behind him with frightening violence.

Daphne froze, wand extended, an expression of absolute shock on her face. She could not believe what had just happened. She felt no remorse for casting the Unforgivable; it was not her first, nor would it be the last. But the total loss of control, the terrible, earth-shattering rage contained within her that had consumed her, annihilating all conscious thought.

It *frightened* her.

It frightened her because it had reared its ghastly head only once before in her life.

The night that she had lost her husband and made several of his murderers pay the ultimate price.

The night she'd truly become a legend, the night she wished more than anything she could forget.

The night she'd wondered just how far down the path of Darkness she had gone...and if there was any way stop her downward plunge into the seductress that was the Dark Arts. The power; more

importantly, her sheer *ecstasy* as she unleashed her wrath, her *lust* for vengeance and her *infatuation* with total control...her *satisfaction* as they screamed.

Not even when she had driven the McCourns over the edge of sanity had she felt so empowered, so...*rapturous*.

That had been the reason she hadn't been there for Lily. She had needed time to heal, yes. But she had been accustomed to the feelings of loss and despair by many years of hardship.

No, as much as she tried to deny it, it was the fear of herself, the fear of what she had become, the very real possibility that she could become just like those she hunted down in the name of justice.

That terror had made her leave, had forced her to stay away. It was no wonder Lily hadn't included her in the list of possible guardians for her son. After seeing the devastation she had wrought, and hearing nothing from her, she'd most likely done the only thing she could do under the circumstances: she'd given up on her best friend.

And as horrible as that Halloween was, that harrowing night when her world had finally come crashing down around her, it might have been the best thing that could have happened to her.

Harry might very well have saved her life, perhaps not literally, but in preserving the last shreds of dignity and humanity in the blackened soul of a broken woman. Simply through his innocence and his purity, he might well have pulled her back into The Light.

And now she stared at the being that dared to take away the light of her life.

Riddle continued to laugh, a high, cold laughter that did nothing but reinforce the cause of the combined misery of Harry, Daphne, and countless others. He was standing in front of her, laughing at her inner struggle. She lowered her wand slightly. Her rage threatened to rise again as she caught sight of Riddle twirling Harry's wand, the wand that she had bought for him, in his long fingers.

“And so finally I meet the woman, the myth, the legend...Daphne Artemis Dressler,” Riddle said softly, dragging out each syllable with a sarcasm that put Snape to shame. “And my old mentor, of course,” he said, giving Dumbledore a spurious half bow.

The Headmaster's magic sung; a long, melodious note that reverberated in the air. The very *feel* of the magic was exhilarating. She drank it in, feeling her confidence and focus grow. Her body had become accustomed to the sensation, and no longer served as a distraction, but as an inspiration.

“Hello Voldemort,” she replied, no hesitation in her voice.

Tom smiled. “Ah, good. Your *son* informed me that most in this time fear to speak that name...perhaps I am speaking to an equal...or perhaps not...”

Daphne fought her rage, forcing it down into the depths of her mind. Now was not the time. She needed to think clearly, and remain calm.

“I'm sure,” she replied in an icy tone.

Dumbledore interrupted them. “*Let them go, Tom,*” he commanded. Daphne could feel the magic that came with those words, but the spectre appeared unaffected. He grinned viciously.

“I suppose it's pointless to delay,” he said, looking pointedly at Daphne, who had been slowly advancing on the sprawled form of Harry. Daphne stopped instantly, her grip on her wand tightening. “You no doubt know the stakes.”

“You are outnumbered, Tom,” Dumbledore reminded him. “Nor do you have the power to defeat us. One need only destroy the Diary, and you will cease to exist.”

“I'm afraid you are wrong about that, Dumbledore,” Tom replied coolly. “You see, Potter's mind is a far more enjoyable location. One must deal with his rather pathetic attempts to break my grasp, but it is bearable.”

Dumbledore raised his wand. "I can destroy you, Tom," he said with a tenor of power in his voice. The hum of his magic grew louder even as it darkened. Fawkes took flight from his perch atop his companion's shoulder. Phoenix song filled the air, and even without a body, Riddle flinched.

To her disgust, so did Daphne.

"*Very well,*" he hissed in a serpentine timbre. "*A challenge for the both of you, then...*"

Riddle turned to face the granite shrine of his ancestor. He hissed something indecipherable in Parseltongue. Daphne instantly pulled the blindfold over her eyes. She stared into the darkness, but saw a dark green aura slithering slowly from inside what Daphne assumed was the likeness of Slytherin.

Something hissed back, and the dark green aura grew in size. Daphne could see nothing in the space in front of her, of course, but the O'Connor heritage allowed her to see the magic in her mind's eye.

There was a loud thump as the Basilisk fell to the floor. She didn't fear for the safety of her son and his friend; Riddle needed them alive to complete the ritual. She walked slowly backwards, maintaining control of her body to avoid losing her balance. The air was filled with a loud hiss.

"And so the Master will die by the hand of the Student," Riddle said, as if quoting a book. He hissed again and Daphne heard something move past her as she backed away slowly.

I am the Basilisk's target, Albus's voice spoke in her mind. You know what you must do. Good luck, Daphne.

Fawkes squawked loudly, and Riddle screamed something else in Parseltongue. Daphne heard a grating noise of stone on stone for several seconds, then a crash. She looked around in confusion. The auras of both Dumbledore and the Basilisk were gone.

"You can remove that blindfold now," Riddle said in a mocking voice. "I believe we have a score to settle. You murdered the closest thing

I've ever had to a friend, and I have placed the one you love above all others in danger...I believe that these...injustices are grounds for a duel..."

Daphne extended her senses again, but the fact that she could sense nothing of the aura belonging to the King of Serpents convinced her that for once, Riddle was telling the truth. She wasn't surprised that he hadn't attack yet; her wand was drawn, and he knew as well as she did that she would be able to block or dodge anything that came her way.

Riddle still hovered an inch off the ground, standing over the unconscious bodies of Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter. The latter's wand was being twirled in Riddle's fingertips. "Time is of the essence, is it not, Daphne?" he said softly. "After all, while the Rite of Unwilling Sacrifice is time-consuming, it *does* come to a conclusion eventually."

Daphne's instincts took over, and she dropped into her fighting stance. Her legs were spread evenly, and her knees bent. She shifted her weight every few seconds, keeping her body moving. Her wand was pointed at the ceiling, and her eyes were fixed on her adversary. The words of her mentor, Alastor Moody, rang in her ears. *Constant Vigilance, O'Connor! Focus on your target! React without hesitation, strike without warning...*

She'd never forgotten her duels with the grizzled, paranoid, mutilated Auror, who had been but a young prodigy, much like herself, during the war with Grindelwald. He'd taught her many things as her personal instructor that had saved her life countless times.

Daphne raised her wand, a Spirit Banishing Curse on her lips...

Riddle *vanished*.

She blinked.

Then, she saw Harry stir. He groaned, and pushed himself to his feet with his arms, shaking his head as if to clear it. Her short-lived jubilation was annihilated as crimson eyes opened in the place of Lily's. Tom Riddle straightened, leering viciously at Daphne.

"I never said I would play fair," Riddle remarked at her shocked expression.

"Discerpo!"

Daphne reacted just in time. She whipped her wand in quick arc, a jade green Deflection Shield intercepting the powerful curse. It ricocheted off the barrier, striking the far wall and carving a deep groove.

Daphne struck next. *"Abrumpo!"* Riddle slapped her Slicing Curse to the side as if it was a Tickling Charm. The effortless Deflection Spell impressed Daphne.

"Is that really the best that you can do?" Riddle taunted, firing another Severing Curse at her. Daphne ducked and it soared over her head.

Daphne fired a Blasting Hex that Riddle reflected into the ceiling. He fired back a Striking Hex, which was partially blocked by Daphne's hastily conjured shield. The remaining energy struck her left shoulders, knocking her off balance. She nearly paid for it when a Slicing Curse from Riddle dug a deep groove in the stone floor inches from her stomach.

Daphne rolled over, popping up into a crouch, and then shot off a pair of nonverbal Stunners. She knew full well that Riddle would avoid or deflect both of them, but the basic dueling spells bought her the time she needed to get back to her feet. Riddle's next spell was Ripping Curse. The purple fire struck her Servos Shield with a loud bang, before it flew back at Riddle. He dove aside, and the spell smashed the right cheek of Salazar's statue, creating a large crater.

Daphne and Riddle circled each other.

"Is this all you've got?" Riddle taunted. "I must wonder how dear Evan was even defeated by you..."

"Avada Kedavra!"

Daphne wasn't expecting the Killing Curse, and chided herself as the jet of green light caught a part of her robes, setting them on fire. She rolled over, extinguishing the blaze.

What is wrong with me? She questioned herself, rolling away from another curse, by the looks of it, an Entrails-Expelling Curse. She stared down the crimson eyes of her...son.

That's it, she realized. You're afraid of losing him. You're terrified of hurting him. You can't afford that, Daphne. You won't do him any good if you continue to fight like a foolish schoolgirl.

"*Everbero! Diffindo!*" she cast in rapid succession. It was a very effective combination. Riddle got a shield up to block the powerful Bludgeoning Curse, which could send an opponent through a brick wall with a direct hit. But just as Daphne had been knocked off balance by the half-deflected Slicing Curse, Riddle took the brunt of the physical impact, and stumbled backwards, nearly losing his footing. The Cutting Curse sliced a gash across his...*Harry's* right shoulder. He cursed angrily, and then fired a poorly aimed Killing Curse that hit the floor three feet in front of Daphne.

Daphne didn't give him a chance to rest, casting three Slicing Curses in a row. The first caught Riddle on the ankle, allowing him to miss the last two. Daphne sucked in a breath with realization that she had come within inches of taking off Harry's right foot.

Riddle kicked the foot, trying to shake off the pain. He sneered at her. "Pathetic, Dressler," he spat angrily. "You are a coward. You let your affections for the boy get in the way of your dueling. You do realize that when I kill you, Harry will die too?"

Daphne didn't respond, except for the Severing Curse she fired back. Riddle was forced to dive out of the way; the curse had too much power behind it to block. Daphne felt exhausted from the effort, her magic drained. She skipped rope as an angry Riddle retaliated with two Cruciatus Curses. He too looked exhausted.

She fired a Stunning Spell just to keep him busy as she thought of a plan. Riddle appeared to be trying to get her off balance. "For the

ward of an Auror, Harry's a bit too trusting. I was inside his mind in a week. Do you know what the first thing was that I had him do?"

Rather than fighting down her anger, Daphne tried to harness it. The resulting Striking Curse went horribly awry, missing by two feet. Riddle laughed. "I had him kill the half-giant's roosters. Used them as target practice...he got much better at his Cutting Curses after that. But what do they say? Practice makes perfect..."

"Shut up," she snapped, and then reared back as if to throw a powerful hex. "*Impedimenta*," she cast instead. Her feint worked, and Riddle was knocked backward by the basic hex, his movements compromised. Daphne's next spell was a Cutting Curse that hit Harry's right wrist. She could only pray she hadn't cut tendons.

Riddle dropped the wand, cursing in pain. Then Daphne was hurled across the floor, landing hard on her back. Riddle was obviously trained enough at sixteen in wandless magic to execute a Flinging Hex. She rolled over, groaning in pain. Riddle's Slicing Curse hit her unawares, and ripped a gash across the back of her left leg. She cursed again, and felt her rage building. She fired half-a-dozen hexes, hitting Riddle with a Cutting Curse across Harry's thigh and a partially blocked Bludgeoning Hex that knocked him over. Daphne got back to her feet, quickly followed by her adversary, and the two injured duelists continued to circle one another, probing for weaknesses.

"Potter loves you a great deal, you know. You're his hero, his mother, and his protector, all in one. What would he think of you if you knew that you'd gotten him killed?" he said, sneering at her. The words cut deep into her heart, and her anger reared up again.

"You know *nothing* of that!" she spat. She circled around him again, firing a Bludgeoning Hex that he managed to get a Servos Shield on. Daphne ducked the deflection spell. Riddle followed up with a Cruciatus Curse.

"Perhaps not," Riddle said softly, "but I am stronger for it. There is no person that I would die for, yet I could still expect men like Evan to die for me. What else is that but true power?"

Another Slicing Curse that Daphne slapped aside angrily. *How dare he mock her relationship with Harry?*

“Pathetic, Daphne,” he spat back. “If this is really the best the Aurors had to offer, then I’ll be amazed if my future self doesn’t wipe them out when he has the chance.”

Daphne parried a Blasting Hex that Riddle fired seemingly out of boredom. “And yet you were defeated by a *boy*, a boy who couldn’t walk or talk. You made an error in judgment that cost you everything,” she retaliated, a vicious smirk creasing her lips. “And the world has lived at peace.”

“Not for long,” he snapped back, firing another Entrail-Expelling Curse, a favorite of several Death Eaters. Daphne found it easier to dodge than waste energy on yet another Servos Shield. She was already beginning to tire; duels like this were exhausting. The pain in her leg was dulled by the adrenaline rushing through her veins, but it was noticeable nonetheless. She would have healed it if she knew she had a chance that Riddle wouldn’t try to hit her while she was distracted.

“I will return, soon,” he continued confidently. Then he smirked evilly. “And I’m not the *only one* who has made mistakes in judgment, am I, Daphne?”

Strike, parry. Strike, parry, she repeated in her mind, trying not to let Riddle get her off balance. He had a lot of ammunition to use in a verbal battle, and everything he said was *true*, after all. *But I’ve put it behind me*, she reminded herself. *It’s a part of me, but I can’t allow it to rule my life...*

“I would say not,” she ground out through gritted teeth. “*Sectumsemptra!*”

Riddle threw up a shield, but his inexperience with the spell showed. A wide gash appeared across Harry’s left leg, and he too began to hobble slightly. “Never seen that before,” he admitted, before firing back a Killing Curse. Daphne dodged, but his advantage was clear. Daphne was limited in what spells she could use if she was to keep Harry alive.

"You see your weakness before you, Daphne," Riddle continued, blocking her Slicing Curse with ease, before firing back a Blinding Hex and a Whipping Curse. Daphne blocked the former and dodged the latter.

"You cannot bear to see him die, can you?" Riddle leered. "It forces you to scale back, to neutralize your most powerful weapons."

As if to prove him wrong, Daphne fired a Slicing Curse at his head. He blocked it, but Daphne felt a cold sweat on her forehead as she realized what would have happened if he hadn't. *I'll never forgive myself. I might just end it all right down here, with him...*

But at the same time, she knew he was right. She was fighting on her heels, reacting rather than taking the offensive, because she was scared to death of inflicting a mortal wound on her adopted son's body. She considered Legillimacy, but realized that if she failed, she'd be an easy target.

And if I am dead, then Harry and Ginny will die too.

Speaking of the girl, she was growing paler by the minute. Riddle was growing stronger, his magic increasing. It was clear that Daphne had precious little time to bring him down. The ritual could not be stopped unless one or both of the participants were killed.

Would you do that? An inner voice asked as she deflected a salvo of curses from Riddle. *Would you sacrifice her just to save Harry? What kind of person does that make you, Daphne? Is that what you've always been afraid of?*

No, she couldn't do that. Harry would never forgive her, and she'd probably never forgive herself. She didn't have it in her to murder an eleven-year old girl, to make her a sacrifice to her own ends.

At least, she hoped she didn't.

Daphne fired off another pair of Slicing Curses, which Riddle dodged. Daphne was amazed by the skill of the 16-year old shade. Riddle was able to draw upon the combined powers of his...host, Ginny, and the Diary, but the vast array of curses and the flawless execution was

simply unheard of for a wizard so young. It was obvious now why Tom Riddle had gathered followers. Even in this state, Daphne could feel the allure of his power.

"You are a fool, Daphne," Riddle continued. It pained her greatly to see the words that Tom had spoke emerging from her nephew's mouth, but she couldn't focus on that now. *He's just another Death Eater. Forget his features, they aren't important. Fight to win, don't hold back.*

I can't do that.

"*Still*, you hold back. *You* know as well as *I* that you could end all of this *right now* by killing the girl. But you *won't* do that, will you? You cannot stand to have even more blood on your hands." He smirked. "And it isn't *all* Death Eaters, is it, Daphne," he said softly in a singsong voice. "All of those whom you've failed. Your parents, your friends, your husband...what's one more to the list, Daphne? I'm sure you're *accustomed* to it by now."

He must pay...he must DIE...KILL HIM!

Daphne's anger roared in her mind, her magic demanding to be released. Daphne hastily forced it down, pushing back the roiling tides of fury. She couldn't be distracted. More than one life depended on this. She could only hope that Dumbledore might return soon enough to help if she faltered.

Another pair of Slashing Hexes. Riddle was ready this time, and cast a well-timed Servos Shield to take both at once. She spun around, dodging the ricochets of the rather troublesome curses which refused to be hit back in the direction from which they came. It was why the Sectumsempra Slashing Curse was so prized, along with its resistance to Healing Charms.

Riddle changed tactics. He fired a pair of powerful Blasting Hexes, then followed up with two Bone-Shattering Curses. Daphne was knocked off balance dodging the white jets of light that blew small craters in the floor where her feet had been. And while she avoided the first blast of blue light, the second hit her left hand.

The appendage erupted in agony as the bones were blown into splinters, tearing into the tissue. She bit back a cry of agony and cast a quick Numbing Charm, trying to keep fighting. Her anger was crashing against its walls, using the pain as fuel to fight its captor.

"Harry told me all about your past," Riddle began lazily, shooting off a Stunner that Daphne blocked effortlessly. "Quite tragic it's been...perhaps more so that you had to be there each time...well, until the last. Why did you run away like that, Daphne? Why did you abandon Lily to her fate?"

Daphne clenched her teeth and tried to resist simply venting her magic onto Riddle, but that would likely kill them both. Daphne's magic was like a pressure cooker, and had been for some time. The more pressure that built, the more damage was done when the top was removed. Her rage scratched and clawed against the barriers like a feral animal seeking blood.

"And of course, the other two were just as bad. You, the great Grey Maiden, are renowned in the history books, are you not? Do any of them mention that you failed your most important assignments? I daresay if you'd been better, maybe they'd still be here...or perhaps not," Riddle said, shrugging. "*Thanks to your weakness, we'll never know.*"

Her barriers buckled, and then shattered as a tidal wave of fearsome anger ripped through her, flooding her mind with horrific memories and negative emotions. Her frail attempts at Occlumency were obliterated by the waves, like a sandcastle caught in a storm surge. Her vision darkened, and the pain of her injuries fed the unquenchable inferno.

"*CRUCIO!*"

The force of Daphne's rage was funneled into the slender piece of mahogany, and her wand buckled from the surge of power. The curse hit Riddle in the midsection as a solid mass. It sent him flying backwards, striking the far wall, his attempt at a shield was blown away like feather in a hurricane of Dark Magic.

Riddle screamed. He began to convulse, rolling over on the floor, scratching and clawing to escape the horrendous agony. Daphne held her wand steady, a vindictive smile darkening her expression. Her eyes were cold gemstones, fiery in their gaze, and merciless in their fixation.

Riddle screamed again, but this time it was different, it was more familiar. Harry vomited up blood, shrieking in agony. He pleaded for mercy...*asked her why she was doing this...that he loved her...*

Then the convulsing figure rolled over, and pain-glazed emerald eyes shone back at her in confusion and betrayal. The look changed to that of utter despair. He was whimpering softly in between the screams.

WHAT HAVE I DONE?

Daphne jerked back her wand as if she'd been shot, just barely resisting the urge to hurl it away in disgust. A mind-numbing horror, one that exceeded even that she experienced crawling out of the hidden basement and finding her family murdered, one that exceeded watching Dolohov's Killing Curse striking her husband in the chest, one that exceeded her first kill, when at sixteen she'd blown the head off of a Death Eater maybe a year older than herself...and one exceeding the gut-wrenching revulsion she'd felt after she'd massacred three Death Eaters and *enjoyed it...nothing* compared to the feeling that was spreading slowly through her mind.

Harry stopped screaming, and rolled over onto his back. Then he cried out again, and seemed to be straining against something. His back arched and his body stiffened. When he got back to his feet, wincing, the crimson slits of Tom Marvolo Riddle had replaced the eyes of her beloved son.

Riddle laughed as he took in her expression, a high, cold, hysterical laugh that ordinarily might have led her to cast the Killing Curse without blinking, but in this situation, barely registered.

She felt like she'd become Voldemort. She'd just tortured the person she loved above all others. She'd been, maybe, a minute away from

doing to Lily's son what Bellatrix had done to Alice and Frank Longbottom.

She wanted to die, or break down weeping, whichever came first. She felt dirty, almost defiled, as if she had just been violated. She couldn't know for sure, but she wasn't sure even *that* would make her feel this awful.

She raised her wand shakily. She still had a battle to win. She could deal with the repercussions later, and later, and if Harry never wanted to speak to her again, well, that was his decision. She'd deal with it when it came. As long as he was safe, she could rest easily.

Riddle's laughter faded in intensity. Daphne's rage rose again, but this time, it was concentrated, focused. Daphne went on the offensive.

Curse after curse shot forth from her wand. She felt her exhaustion building, but called upon her reserves as she continued her assault. Most of her attacks missed or were deflected, but by sheer number, enough of them got through, battering Harry's already beaten and bruised body.

Then Riddle unleashed his own magic. The sheer ferocity of it caught her completely by surprise. She was hurled off her feet and slammed hard into the wall. Her world went dark.

When she awoke Riddle was standing over her, a vicious grin on his face. "So ends the career of the Grey Maiden. May she rest in peace with her beloved son."

Daphne didn't have the energy to stand up. Her head was spinning, and her wounds burning. From the soreness she felt, she wondered if Riddle had hit her with the Cruciatus Curse while she was unconscious. Her wand lay two feet away from her, out of reach. Daphne looked up helpless. This was not the way she was supposed to die. Not like this, beaten and gasping for breath in a puddle of water and blood.

Riddle drew his wand back in dramatic fashion, a look of glee lighting his features. "AVADA K-"

“Percutio!” a small voice gasped. Under normal circumstances, it wouldn’t have worked. However, Riddle’s preoccupation with finishing off the duel meant that he didn’t react nearly fast enough when Ginny Weasley’s Striking Curse slammed into his back. He didn’t fall, but the distraction was enough.

Daphne, adrenaline pumping in her veins, took this new chance at life and grabbed it by the throat. She reached out and wordlessly summoned her wand. As Riddle spun around to face his attacker, his eyes blazing, Daphne saw Ginny collapse to the floor, though whether it was because her life energies were fading quickly or because of Riddle’s mental assault, she didn’t know. What she did know was that when Riddle had unleashed his magic, he’d momentarily disrupted the connection between himself and the redhead.

As Riddle turned around, Daphne struck. Every last ounce of energy, magical and physical, that she possessed was funneled into her wand in her last ditch attempt to bring down Riddle.

“PELLO ANIMUS!” Once more, her wand buckled from the release of magic. Daphne collapsed to the floor, and then looked up, praying she’d get the desired results.

The Spirit Banishing Spell, something she’d been taught by Alastor Moody himself, enveloped Riddle in a field of rippling white energy. She’d been unable to cast it before because it was far too easy to block. Riddle had turned only halfway when he was hit. He was frozen in the middle of the Chamber, screaming. But this time, it was not replaced by the cries of her adopted son.

With one last shriek, Riddle was ripped away from Harry’s mind. A beam of light shot from Harry’s temple and landed on the far side of the Chamber, morphing into a livid Tom Riddle, incorporeal once more.

Harry gasped, his eyes rolling back in his head. Then he collapsed.

Daphne pushed herself to her feet, running on fumes. She was horrified to see that Riddle was laughing.

"I'm surprised by you, Daphne," he said softly, his snake-like tone returning. "Apparently you don't care for his well-being quite as much as I believed. After all, what you just did could be best compared to ripping a tree out of the ground. You've shattered his mind. My roots were deep, Daphne..."

Daphne froze as what Riddle had just said began to sink in. *He's right...oh Merlin, what have I done..? How could I have been so stupid..?*

As her wand clattered to the floor, the entrance to the Chamber exploded inward. Both she and Riddle spun around, and Riddle let out a primal scream of frustration and fury. *"DUMBLEDORE!"*

Daphne's head was spinning, but she managed to focus on the Headmaster, standing there in all his glory. His robes were ripped in several places, and Daphne could see blood stains from minor injuries. Fawkes hovered above him, the air around him an inferno. It was a phoenix that had been called to war.

Dumbledore also held the Sword of Gryffindor, its red rubies shining brightly in the light of the flickering torches. Its blade was coated in dark-red blood.

"Your serpent is dead, Tom. And it is time for you to go as well."

Dumbledore extended a hand, magic swirling about him. The Diary, which was lying in a puddle where it had fallen out of the clutches of the now unconscious Ginny Weasley, soared through the air. Dumbledore's magic overpowered Riddle, and the object merely wobbled before it landed in Dumbledore's free hand.

"NO!" Riddle screamed, raising his hands to unleash his magic.

Too late. Dumbledore thrust the sword that had ended Salazar Slytherin's life through the Diary, skewering it on the blood soaked blade. Black ink began to flow out of the Diary in torrents, and Riddle screamed in agony. Daphne slowly turned her head to see Riddle's form flashing and writhing. Fire began to burn at the edges of his outline, and moved a furious place towards the center. In a flash of fire, with one final shriek, Tom Riddle vanished.

Daphne glanced up at Dumbledore, who appeared lost for words. She glanced over at where Harry lay.

Ginny stirred. Harry didn't.

Darkness enveloped her vision. She was unconscious before she hit the floor.

Chapter 19: Summer Brings No Light

It was a situation that Hermione Jane Granger had often found herself in over the last few days. She sat in the corner of the Gryffindor 2nd Year Girl's Dormitory, on one of the low windowstools, and gazed out onto the Hogwarts Grounds, lit only by the light of the moon. Tears tracked silently down her face, dripping off of her chin and falling to the ground. She made no attempt to wipe them away.

After all, what right did *she* have to be ashamed? What right did *she* have to wallow in her own misery?

Her eyes were fixed on the distant lights in Hagrid's cabin, the only sight that she could make out clearly on the moonlit night. It was around midnight, but Hagrid apparently hadn't retired for the night. It was fairly likely that he was drunk and collapsed on the floor of his hut. He'd taken what had happened to Harry surprisingly hard.

Hermione supposed it was reasonable enough. They all missed the signs. Hermione still wasn't sure how Harry had been so...*stupid*...

Speak for yourself, Hermione. Weren't you the one giving Tom a vote of confidence last week when Ginny was skeptical?

Hermione had to admit that her subconscious had hit the nail right on the head. *Harry had the sixteen-year old form of a Dark Lord in his head, a Dark Lord extremely manipulative and deceitful. Harry may be really mature at times, but truthfully, he's still just a twelve-year old wizard in training.*

A twelve-year old wizard who had gone through one of the most traumatic experiences imaginable. *And we don't even know the whole story, and won't, until Daphne and Ginny wake up.*

Harry's guardian was expected to make a full recovery, and Madam Pomfrey had healed her wounds and treated her exposure to the Cruciatus Curse, which she suspected might have been put on her while she was unconscious. However, her largest problem was the almost total magical exhaustion she had suffered. Her magic had been depleted to dangerous levels, just as Hermione's had when she had been attacked by Quirrell in the Forbidden Forest the previous

year. It was actually testament to just how hard Daphne had fought that a witch renowned for her power and endurance had nearly killed herself with little aid from her adversary. Madam Pomfrey expected she would be awake in a day or two, as she was recovering rapidly.

Though when she'd visited Ginny, Hermione had always noticed that the Grey Maiden was rather restless, tossing and turning, her eyes squeezed tightly shut. Hermione didn't even want to ponder the horrific nightmares that the woman was suffering.

As for her other best friend, Ginny had been within a minute of death when Dumbledore had destroyed the Diary. Her magic was also entirely depleted; mostly by one spell that Dumbledore was shocked to discover had been cast *after* the Rite of Unwilling Sacrifice was begun. Hermione was sure that there was a story behind that. Beyond her magic, physically, her life force, which had been restored to her body with the destruction of Riddle's power base, was slowly seeping back into her system; recharging her 'batteries,' for lack of a better term.

Hermione had awoken at around noon the day after she'd been attacked. As she opened her eyes, she was assaulted by images of what had happened, specifically, of her best friend attacking her with an extraordinarily painful curse. She supposed it had something to do with the nightmares she could only vaguely remember, though.

Hermione began shivering as she remembered. She closed her eyes tightly, trying to block out the horrifying images.

"How are you, dear?" Madam Pomfrey asked from beside her, in a warm, caring voice. "Forget that, I'm sure you are frightened to death," she chided herself. "Well, I'm sure you'll be pleased to know that you'll make a full recovery."

Hermione frowned. "How long have I been unconscious?" she asked in a shaky voice.

Madam Pomfrey smiled sadly. "Only about a day and a half...you were very fortunate, dear," she said, as she checked her temperature, laying a hand on Hermione's forehead. She frowned. "Perhaps not, you're cold as ice." She waved her wand, and Hermione suddenly felt

much warmer. "Warming Charm, dear, one of the only non-verbal spells I can use, besides my Healing Magic, of course."

She moved towards the end of the bed, and tucked the sheets back under the bed. Hermione saw her glanced over a group of beds on the other side of the Hospital Wing, and froze.

Black hair. Red hair. Blond hair.

Harry. Ginny. Daphne.

"Madam Pomfrey?" Hermione asked nervously. The matron followed her gaze. "Yes, they all came yesterday, about three hours after you. Miss Weasley and Mrs. Dressler are suffering from Magical Exhaustion thought Miss Weasley is also recovering from nearly having her life force drained from her by some pureblooded ritual." Hermione's blood froze, but she was surprised by the anger in the Mediwitch's voice.

"What?" Hermione asked disbelievingly. Obviously, something had happened.

Madam Pomfrey had a pained look on her face. "I really don't know much about it, Miss Granger, and I'm only breaking my oath of silence because you are their friend." She turned back to her, sympathy and pity in her eyes. "I'm sorry dear, but you'll have to ask your Head of House."

"What about the Petrified victims?" Hermione blurted as the matron turned to go.

Madam Pomfrey blinked. "Oh, well, they'll be awoken tomorrow morning. Severus is putting the finishing touches of the Mandrake Restorative Draught. I expect you're interested in the well being of Miss Turpin?"

"Yes," she admitted, "but what I'm more concerned about is that Ron might try to attack Harry when he wakes up." She looked at her earnestly. "They don't get along."

"I know that," the Mediwitch said, sighing. "I'll keep them separated. Hopefully Miss Weasley wakes tomorrow as well, though I wouldn't bet on it. The entire Weasley clan is coming to visit them."

Hermione sank back into the sheets. Could things get any worse?

The matron gave her another sympathetic look. "Don't worry, I'll ward them away from you if I have to."

"That's not it," Hermione explained. "I'm afraid that Ron's going to cry bloody murder when he wakes up, and the whole school will know."

Madam Pomfrey sighed. "I don't think we've got the legal stance to put an Unbreakable Bond on him to ensure his silence, so unfortunately, you are probably right...Now, you are still recovering. Get some sleep, Miss Granger." She left.

Hermione stared at her friends for a while, but that brought her negative thoughts to the forefront of her mind yet again. She settled for staring out the window at the evening sky until she fell asleep. For once, schoolwork, or how she was going to explain this to her parents, was the last thing on her mind.

Hermione choked back a sob, leaning her head against the window. She didn't want to wake Lavender and Parvati, who had, at first, treated her as a helpless victim. Then, once they had discovered that she was 'deluded,' and believed Harry innocent, she was, again, a traitor of sorts. It was a rather strong stance for a pair of ditzy twelve-year old girls.

Of course, things hadn't gotten any better the next day, when she had finally awoken. It had not been surprising that Ron had been livid, but the problem was that the only person there that believed his innocence was Hermione. To be perfectly honest, she supposed that she *wanted* to believe in his innocence...she couldn't bear the thought that Harry, who had been such a wonderful friend, her first real friend, had been responsible for all of this by his own free will...

Hermione was awoken by loud yelling, and groaned as she opened her eyes, the sun nearly blinding her. It appeared to be mid-morning, but the window opposite her pointed directly to the east.

She rolled over, squinting her eyes as she tried to make out what was going on.

“...I’M GOING TO KILL HIM! THE BLOODY BASTARD HURT GINNY!” Ron bellowed at the top of his lungs.

Hermione looked the scene over carefully. A sea of redheads surrounded Ron’s bed. She recognized Fred and George, who looked as murderous as Hermione had ever seen them. Percy was trying hard to maintain his composure, but his ears were bright red, and his eyes were searching the Infirmary for his brother’s attacker. Hermione saw Ginny’s parents as well. Mrs. Weasley appeared absolutely furious, but also very frustrated. Hermione supposed it was against her nature to be angry with a child; it certainly fit with what Ginny had told them about her mum. Her father looked confused, as if unsure of what to do.

“Mister Weasley!” her Head of House snapped, walking over towards them. “You will do nothing of the sort. I understand that you have been through a great ordeal, but rest assured,” she said, pausing and clenching her teeth, “so has he.”

Fred made a noise of disbelief. Hermione knew they had never really trusted Harry, though they had tried to find a reason to like him. Things had actually been going well, before...all hell broke loose. “Does that matter?” Fred snapped back. “He hurt our brother, and our sister nearly died.” There was a sob that sounded like it came from Molly Weasley. “He needs to answer for that.”

Ron had apparently reached the same conclusion, and forced his way out of his bed, taking unsteady steps, his wand, which had been lying on this nightstand, now clenched in his hand. Hermione now saw that he was approaching where Daphne and Harry lay, their beds within a foot of each other, and Daphne’s right arm was actually touching Harry’s side. She mothers even when she’s unconscious, Hermione marveled.

Hermione tried to get up, but was far too weak, and fell back to the bed, looking on helplessly. Arthur Weasley was bright red, and stood up, trying to stop his son. Percy, ever the disciplinarian, actually drew his wand and shouted over to his brother to stop. Molly still had her

head buried in her hands, and was sitting on her daughter's bed, which Hermione now saw had been moved from its place near Harry's and Daphne's beds.

But neither Arthur Weasley nor Minerva McGonagall stopped the angry boy. Instead, Severus Snape intercepted him, appearing out of nowhere. In an instant, he shoved the boy back and drew his wand, leveling it at the Gryffindor. His face was set and emotionless, but his gaze was cold and unforgiving.

Ron took a step back, and opened his mouth to say something, but Snape beat him again. "You will do nothing of the sort, Mr. Weasley," he replied in a cold voice that made Hermione shiver. "In fact, you will return to your bed, if you have the slightest clue about what is good for you."

Ron snarled at him, but said nothing. Snape was relentless.

"If you could overcome your awe-inspiring stupidity and use the brain that rarely manifests itself, you might realize that Potter looks a bit...well, dead. That's because he is severely injured." Snape took another step forward, his eyes glittering with malice. "You may have been through a traumatic experience, Weasley, but Potter endured the enviable pleasure of having the Dark Lord in his mind for the duration of the school year. And that was before his mind was ripped to shreds."

He advanced again, and Ron whimpered and backed away. "I've been in his head, Weasley, as per instructions by the Head Master. It looks like a muggle bomb went off inside. The mind is a complex entity, Weasley, and often will organize itself into shapes, which can be seen with Legilimency. Potter appears to have had a mind that resembled a Quidditch Pitch. Not that one can tell any longer..."

Fred and George stepped forward to help out their brother, but Arthur grabbed both of them by the back of their shirts and hauled them back. Ron stood alone in the middle of the Infirmary. Snape was looming over him now, his wand still leveled at Ron's chest. He looked like he was restraining himself from cursing the idiot into oblivion.

"Sure," Ron scoffed. "He's probably awake, listening to our conversation right now." He turned to the unconscious form of his nemesis. "Aren't you, Potter?"

Hermione opened her mouth for a scathing retort, but Snape grabbed Ron by the front of his robes and shook him. Minerva barked, "Severus!" but Snape waved her off.

"Shut up. You know nothing. Potter is teetering on the edge of life and sanity, and you are here, screaming at his lifeless form like an irritated ape. Do you think attacking an unconscious boy makes you any more of a man?" he taunted, pushing the Gryffindor away. "I may not always get along with him, but he is a Slytherin, and thus, he is in my charge. If you attempt to harm him, harm will come to you. At least, until Dressler awakens...after that, you can have a free shot at him...just be aware that your poor parents probably won't get enough of you back to fill a matchbox." With that, he spun on his heel and walked over to Harry's bedside, sitting on the windowsill, glaring at Ron.

"You're just protecting your own you bloody Dark Wizard!" Ron shouted.

Molly Weasley was up in an instant. "RONALD BILLIUS WEASLEY!"

"Mister Weasley," McGonagall said sharply. "I will not tolerate insults to Hogwarts professors."

"It's hardly an insult, Minerva," Snape interrupted. "But nonetheless, she is correct, Weasley. I'm afraid you'll be spending your first Mondays and Thursdays in the dungeons with me, cleaning up the messes you dunderheads make on a regular basis..."

Hermione saw the lights in Hagrid's cabin go out, and she knew that the Gamekeeper had finally decided to retire for the night. She wondered if she should do the same. A loud snore from Lavender answered that question. She closed her eyes, leaning against the cold window.

It was going to be a long, long week.

Daphne Dressler made the familiar climb up the spiral staircase to Albus Dumbledore's office. She could hear loud voices from inside and picked up her pace.

Daphne had awoken just two days earlier after being unconscious for nearly a week; considering the amount of magic she'd expended, it was remarkable that it had only been that long. Her first feeling had been that of her hand resting on Harry's side. She had been in a panic, trying to get out of bed and make up for what she had done, but Madam Pomfrey had jumped in and sedated her. When she woke up the next time, she was more aware and rational. She had cried, for the first time since the Prophecy was made known to her, after she had discovered that what had happened was much more than a bad dream

And after all that Daphne had suffered, had been forced to endure, they *all* paled in comparison to the horror and the *guilt* that she felt.

Yes, *the guilt*. It was crushing, suffocating, as if someone had put Hagrid's weight on her shoulders. It was ever present, making biting comments about her failings that made her want to break down. It was a daily struggle to go about maintaining her composure. But she was strong, if not in reality than in the perceptions of others. She couldn't afford changing that perception. It was a part of who she was, a reason that people were more likely to do what she wanted.

But the guilt remained. The guilt for not realizing that the light of her life was being possessed by the Dark Lord. Terribly enough, she felt guilty for trusting him, for believing that everything he said was the truth and that he understood what was going on and that she could trust his actions. She did not want to believe that her adopted son could make such a grievous error. Even after the previous year, when Harry had concealed mental and verbal abuse by a Hogwarts Professor, neglect from the rest of the faculty and reprehensible behavior by the student body; behavior that was only likely to get worse the next year, as rumors of what had happened spread around the school. Harry had hidden his misery and his frustration, simply to avoid upsetting her.

It made Daphne wonder if she had made a mistake by revealing all of her past. Well, she had not given him the juicy details, but she had outlined her career and her actions. And he had accepted them. What she hadn't realized was that she made Harry reluctant to add to her suffering. He wanted her to be happy, just as she wanted him to be happy. And on occasion, those two purposes clashed.

Then there was the duel itself.

She'd *lost* it. There was no other way to describe it. Not the duel, but all the control, all of the discipline that she was so known for had disintegrated simply from the truth of Riddle's taunts. She had allowed her anger to take her over, to exact its vengeance for the first time since she had massacred Edmond's murderers.

Most of them, at least. Two remained. Antonin Dolohov, who had cast the curse, was incarcerated in Azkaban. The other, Thomas Avery, was in high-standing with the Ministry. Daphne would have to lie in wait until the opportunity presented itself.

But that was irrelevant. What did matter was that she had unleashed the power that had put the fear of Merlin into the hearts of the Death Eaters. She'd used an Unforgivable, funneling all of the agony and despair of her life into one spell. It was, she thought, most comparable to an angry parent beating their child, blaming them for things that were not their fault. Of course, that was not what Daphne had intended, but nonetheless, it had happened. And one thing that Daphne had learned was that to fight self-doubt, one had to take full responsibility for their actions.

And it had been her mistake that had led to Harry lying unconscious, his mind broken. Riddle had described what she had done, by forcibly removing him, as uprooting a tree, a tree whose roots ran deep into the ground. *Only Harry's mind is the soil the tree was planted on...*

Daphne reached the top of the staircase, and approached the large oak door. The shouting continued. She thought she recognized the voice, but couldn't quite place it. Without knocking, she pushed the door open.

It revealed a rather interesting scene. Lucius Malfoy was standing in front of Dumbledore's desk, a grey-green house elf trying to shine his shoes. Malfoy, his sleek silvery-blond hair combed neatly behind him into a ponytail, appeared absolutely livid. His face was flushed, and his eyes were blazing. He didn't even notice Daphne enter and close the door softly behind her. Daphne also saw Snape, who was standing in the shadows, observing the entire affair with a rather severe expression. McGonagall was also standing near Dumbledore, her features stoic.

The object of Malfoy's rage was sitting calmly at his desk, peering at the furious ex-Death Eater over his half-moon spectacles. "I'm sorry, Lucius," Dumbledore said once Malfoy had finished ranting, "but the Board of Governors seem to have changed their minds about removing me. The threat has been averted."

"Yes, but at what cost, Dumbledore?" Malfoy asked angrily. "Four students Petrified, one cursed, and two lying unconscious in the Hospital Wing. Not to mention that one of those two is the Boy-Who-Lived?"

To all the world, Lucius Malfoy, Chair of the Board of Governors for Hogwarts and a respected member of the Pureblood Wizarding Family Assembly, (an extremely influential interest group that often had the ear of the Minister,) appeared to be a concerned parent who was also representing what he thought were the best interests of all of the students at Hogwarts. *But that would mean forgetting that the man was, and likely still is: a Death Eater. He wants Dumbledore removed because when Voldemort returns, a disgraced Albus Dumbledore will be much less of a threat, Daphne told herself.*

"And why exactly are *you* so concerned about the well-being of the students, Malfoy?" Daphne interjected. "I can't be the only one here who believes you are not merely acting in what you believe to be the best interests of all. What hidden agenda could you be serving by getting Albus sacked?" a mocking tone sneaking into her question.

Malfoy spun around, snarling. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded to Dumbledore, still looking at Daphne. "What is *she* doing here?"

Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling. *What is the man not amused by?* "Daphne is simply a concerned guardian who wished to speak with me. That said, I value her opinions and thoughts...and her question is a valid one."

"She is accusing me of coming here under false pretenses," Malfoy insisted. "She is neither an employee of Hogwarts, nor of the Ministry. I will not have your disturbed lapdog being a part of this private conversation."

Daphne snapped. "*Lapdog?*" she repeated mockingly. "Who was it that kissed *Voldemort's boots*, *Lucius*? *Are you sure you aren't seeking to clear the way so that once your leader is revived, he may rule unchallenged. I'd expect nothing less from a member of his inner circle.*"

If Lucius had become any angrier, he would have been frothing at the mouth. "*How dare you!*"

Daphne locked eyes with him, refusing to back down. Suddenly, something flickered across Daphne's mind. "*...It will be Potter then...*"

Rage flared at the small tidbit gleaned by her unintentional Legilimency. Daphne considered what she'd just seen. It could be just a random thought, but on the other hand, Malfoy might have something to do with what had occurred. He might be partially responsible for the fact that her son was lying in the Hospital Wing.

Daphne had taken a look inside his mind with Legilimency, and while it had appeared that his mind was healing, slowly, his thoughts had been a mass of fragmented painful memories and confused images. He was, at the moment, certifiably insane. Daphne could only hope that his magic would keep him unconscious long enough so that when he finally awoke, he'd be lucid. Madam Pomfrey was optimistic that with Harry's power and natural healing ability he might recover fully. Harry always recovered from injuries much faster than the average wizard, an ability he had probably inherited from his father who suffered serious Quidditch injuries from time to time..

But it would never be the same. He would always be haunted, and maybe always be a bit unstable. Hopefully, with Occlumency training

and long-term natural mental reconstruction, he'd be okay. It didn't mean that Daphne would forgive herself any sooner, but it meant that she might be able to live with herself.

But standing in front of her might be the person responsible for the entire fiasco.

She called upon her magic, focusing it into a wedge of power, and sent a burst of magic straight at Malfoy, who cried out in pain. His attempts at Occlumency were blown away. Daphne ripped into his mind.

She began searching frantically, looking for the memory that she had glimpsed. She could hear him screaming, hear Snape and Minerva imploring her to stop, but she ignored them.

She kept searching, tearing through his memories. Then she found what she was looking for.

"....So this is the company you keep, a murderer, the friend of a Mudblood, and a pair of Muggles? I suppose like attracts like." Daphne glanced around the memory, searching for something she had missed. This was the only possible opportunity Lucius had had to slip Harry the diary.

Arthur Weasley, whose ears were already bright red, growled and lunged at the senior Malfoy. Daphne saw the look of shock on Malfoy's face as Weasley shoved him backwards into the book shelf. She saw herself begin to move, flicking her wrist to arm herself.

Lucius shoved Arthur away, then drew his wand and fired the Slicing Curse which she blocked with a nonverbal Deflection Spell. But this time she didn't pay attention to that; she knew what had happened. She saw Hagrid rushing over as he saw the developing duel...then, she saw him. Draco Malfoy slunk in from the shadows, and nonchalantly walked towards where Harry and Hermione were standing.

Daphne watched closely as the Pureblood Heir slowly slid his hand into the pocket of his robes then fumbled for a moment before getting a grip. With Hermione and Harry fixated by the sight in front of them,

he flipped a book that Daphne instantly recognized as the Diary into Harry's cauldron, before continuing to the exit, a wide smirk on his face...

Just then, she was forcibly ejected from Malfoy's mind. The ex-Death Eater was on the ground, clutching his head. Dumbledore was standing off to the side, looking absolutely furious.

"DAPHNE!" Dumbledore bellowed angrily.

She ignored him. Instead, she focused on her target. Her voice was full of venom, and her anger buckled at its barriers once more. This time, she was inclined to let it out. She wanted to see Lucius Malfoy die a long, painful death for what he had done to the two Potters she loved.

"You bastard..." she hissed. She opened her mouth, and then stopped. Without even noticing, she had drawn her wand, which was pointed at Malfoy's heart. The incantation for the Cruciatus Curse was on her lips. The blood was pounding in her brain. Malfoy appeared to be livid, but there was more than a little fear in his eyes. The wrath of the Grey Maiden was legendary among the Death Eaters. It was the reason she was the most feared and respected Auror in the First War. Even Alastor Moody couldn't match her proficiency and willingness to use the Dark Arts. Barty Crouch's decree that Aurors could use Unforgivable Curses on suspected Death Eaters might as well have been tailor-made for her. It had come two months after she had tortured the McCourns.

"Daphne! What is the meaning of this?" McGonagall demanded. Snape was frowning, as if he knew something. *He probably does.*

"Daphne, you will release him now!" Dumbledore ordered. The Voice of Command slammed into Daphne's Occlumency Shields and dissipated. The compulsion failed.

"Not until I see him brought to justice," she said between clenched teeth. *"This filth is the reason that my son nearly died, that a number of students nearly died."* She paused, allowing what she had just said to sink in. The fear in Malfoy's eyes had increased tenfold. *"He gave Harry the Diary."*

"You can't prove *anything*, Dressler," Malfoy said from his position on the floor. "The Wizengamot won't accept testimony forcibly taken from another's mind," he sneered. "There is no evidence to back up your outrageous claim."

A plan formed in Daphne's mind, and she smiled nastily. "*Who ever said I needed the Wizengamot?*"

"What are you playing at, Daphne?"

Daphne raised her wand. "*I, born Daphne Artemis O'Connor, demand recompense for wrongs done to Harry James Potter, my ward, by Lucius Abraxas Malfoy. I swear on my magic that I will, from this day forward, place all responsibility for harm done to my ward by any member of the Malfoy family on the magic of Draco Malfoy, son and heir of Lucius. In the name of Merlin's Magic do I swear this Vow of Vengeance.*"

A beam of white light shot forth from the tip of her wand, then broke into separate beams. One went directly backwards and struck Daphne in the heart. There was a tingling sensation, but it was brief and Daphne ignored it. The second beam struck Malfoy's heart, and an expression of surprise appeared on his face. Two more beams flew out of the room, seeking out the magical cores of Harry and Draco.

Daphne lowered her wand, hardening her eyes. "You know the price now, Lucius."

Malfoyspluttered, completely losing his composure. "You bloody *bitch!* I'll have you hauled out in front of the *entire Wizengamot!* And I'll make sure your 'son' watches the *entire thing!* How *dare* you threaten my son?" he demanded.

"*Lucius. Daphne. SILENCE!*" Dumbledore roared. "*That was entirely unnecessary, Daphne. I order you to remove that Vow. I know that you can.*"

Daphne stood straight up, her eyes still not leaving the man sprawled in front of him. The expression of rage still on his face, he pulled

himself to his feet, propping himself up the cane that Daphne knew contained his wand. “No.”

“*Daphne!*” McGonagall cried. “He’s a *child!* No matter what his father...” she sent a glare full of hatred at the ex-Death Eater, “...may have done, Draco is innocent!”

“Hardly,” she mocked, “he’s the one who dropped the Diary in my ward’s cauldron.” He eyes remained locked on Malfoy, who was sending her a look of utmost loathing that would have had most witches running in the opposite direction, dodging a vicious Cruciatus Curse. But Daphne was not most witches.

“Be that as it may,” Snape’s silky voice interjected, “Draco was simply following his father’s wishes. He...*looks up* to Lucius a great deal. He believed that by doing so he would receive praise. It’s like that ridiculous experiment that Squib performed on the dog.”

“I beg you not to compare *my son* to a dirty mongrel, Severus,” Malfoy said softly. “But the analogy is relevant. You have no admissible evidence against me, you have none against Draco. *Remove the Vow.*”

“*Go to hell, Lucius,*” Daphne spat. “*Join your brethren. Say hello to Rosier for me.*”

“*DAPHNE!*” Dumbledore cried angrily. “*You will be silent...In fact, you will leave now. You are dismissed, Daphne. Attend to your ward.*”

“No,” she replied again. She straightened, and matched Malfoy’s eyes again. “My son nearly died...*I’m going to make sure this doesn’t happen again.*”

“*Fine,*” Malfoy spat. “Come Dobby,” he ordered to the House-Elf.

Dobby? “We’re not finished, Lucius,” Daphne warned. Malfoy turned around, looking more exasperated than anything else.

“What do you want now? A duel?”

"*Daphne...*" Dumbledore warned, his voice full of fury. She knew she'd get it from the Light Sorcerer when this was over, but that wasn't important now. Dumbledore would not dress her down in front of the enemy. She'd earned that right.

"No," Daphne said. "Remember, Lucius, when I swore the Vow, I demanded recompense. You have yet to pay it."

"I never thought I'd see the day when the Grey Maiden would be begging for pocket change..." Snape interjected icily.

"I want your House-Elf."

"*What?*" Malfoy spluttered.

"I want your *House-Elf*. Free him now. I think that a House-Elf is worth more than any of the money the Malfoys have in their coffers. I would never sink so low as to rely in *your* funds," she snapped.

Malfoy gritted his teeth. He violently yanked off his right glove and hurled it in Dobby's direction. The excited House-Elf missed it. Lucius cursed, picked it up, and drilled Dobby in the head with it. Dobby was too rapturous to notice, and held the glove like a priceless relic. He mumbled something incoherent, then broke down crying.

Malfoy, disgusted, stormed out. Daphne could feel his magic seeking to destroy something. It was a foul stench, compared to Dumbledore's sweet perfume.

"Dobby thanks Daphne Dressler...Dobby will never forget Daphne Dressler!" the House-Elf squealed. He ran over and hugged Daphne around the ankles. The ex-Auror allowed herself a small smile. *As if there was any doubt that Lucius had mistreated his House-Elves. He hurt one so much that the magical bonds that tied him to the Malfoy Family were frayed. Otherwise, he'd never be this happy.*

"Dobby?" Daphne asked. "How would you like to work for me and Harry at Dressler Manor?"

The House-Elf began crying loudly, wiping his eyes with his filthy pillowcase, and Daphne feared that she'd made the wrong decision.

But he hugged her ankle even tighter, mumbling word of thanks. Daphne smiled, though it was a bit forced. "I'll take that as a yes?"

Dobby broke away from her, still sniffing. He nodded. "Dobby would be honored," he said in a reverent voice.

Daphne smiled, this time a genuine one. "Very well. Report to Dressler Manor, and tell my other House-Elves that you have been made a member of my household. I'm sure you'll do excellent work."

"Thank you Daphne Dressler," he said after a pause. Then, with a CRACK, he vanished. Daphne suspected that House-Elves could sneak through the cracks in the anti-apparition wards, but had never tested that theory.

She took a deep breath, and then turned to face Dumbledore, who was obviously not amused by her behavior. Snape had a look on his face that might just have been pity.

Ginny had not taken a step out of the Hospital Wing when she was bowled over by a fast-moving object, which wrapped her into a bone-crushing hug that her Mum would have been proud of. The vast quantities of bushy brown hair obscuring her vision told her who it was, and she squeezed her best friend just as tightly, tears streaming down both of their faces. When Hermione slowly let go, Ginny saw Madam Pomfrey standing in the doorway of the Hospital Wing, a sad smile on her face and her eyes glistening with tears. She left.

"Are you alright?" Hermione asked quietly.

Ginny nodded. "Just a little tired," she admitted. She'd been filled in on what happened to her...and to Harry, by her friend's guardian. The woman had taken up an indefinite vigil at Harry's bedside, her legs propped up on a chair, a book in her hands. She'd occasionally walk over to brush the hair away from Harry's face or to whisper something to him, but other than that, she didn't move. *And until Harry does, she probably won't spend much time away from him,* Ginny thought. *Still, she didn't tell me the whole truth. She said she did something stupid to put him into a coma, but she didn't specify what...*

Ginny tried to pry her thoughts away from that topic, and wiped at the tears already streaming down her face. "How's the school been taking it?"

Hermione winced. "Half of them are convinced that Harry's faking it," she said, angry bitterness in her voice. Ginny was in a mind to hex all of them; her brothers were probably leading the group. "...The rest are just confused. They don't understand why Harry would attack his two best friends and then end up in a coma while his friends woke up much sooner."

"Let me guess," Ginny began angrily. "My brothers are part of the former category?"

Hermione sighed. "They don't want you near him ever again. Snape had to stop Ronald from attacking him after they gave out the Mandrake Restorative Draught."

Ginny felt pain in her hands, then realized that her fingernails were digging into her palm. She tried to relax, and took a deep breath. "They aren't going to get what they want, then."

Hermione looked depressed, and Ginny knew that wasn't all. "What else?"

Her bushy haired best friend bit her lip, a sure sign of distress. "Well, your parents were kind of in agreement with them," she said very quickly.

Ginny felt herself pale. "*What?*"

Hermione was biting her lip so hard she winced. "Well, you mum didn't really *blame* Harry..."

Ginny nodded impatiently. She knew that her mother would just as soon smother the orphan boy with hugs. Her mum might get angry with them at times, but it was over bad behavior, not about being a dark wizard. *And she did send him a Weasley sweater...*

"...Well, she sort of implied that maybe it wasn't such a good idea for you to be around him anymore, that he was dangerous." Hermione

paced in a circle, and then stopped, looking her in the eye. "She said she thought it might be best if you spent more time with your family and with the Gryffindor's..."

Ginny was not sure she had ever been this furious with her mother at any point in her eleven and a half years of existence. It was obvious that it was a misunderstanding, and that her mum was very overprotective of her and was doing it out of love, not dislike of Harry...

No, it was the fact that she thought Ginny should spend more time with the *Gryffindor's*, (that she meant *Ron* went unspoken,) and that made Ginny shake with anger. "*SHE DOESN'T KNOW ANYTHING!*" Ginny cried, her voice hoarse. "*How can she say that..?*"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know...I suppose it looks pretty bad if you don't know Harry...or don't know the entire story..."

"*I don't care...*" Ginny said, leaning against a wall, sobbing. "*Harry's in a bloody coma and Mum's worrying about my safety...*" Hermione made a move to come closer to her, but thought better of it. "What about my dad?" Ginny asked.

Hermione shrugged. "He seemed rather confused about what to do," she admitted. "I'm not sure what he thinks...should we go down to dinner?"

Ginny nodded. "You're sitting at the Slytherin Table. Malfoy can sod off."

Hermione smiled sadly. "Thanks, Gin."

The Great Hall quieted as Dumbledore rose. There was a clatter of silverware, but no voices broke the solemn silence.

Dumbledore cleared his voice, and Hermione sat up straight, listening intently. Ron Weasley, sitting near her, had a scowl on his face, one that had been mostly ever-present since Snape had threatened him. On the other hand, he hadn't visited the Hospital Wing either. Daphne

had refused to have Harry moved to St. Mungo's to avoid his condition being made into a spectacle.

Unfortunately, that was going to happen anyway, and with Daphne's reluctant blessing. Dumbledore had argued to her that the wizarding world could not be allowed to completely doubt the Boy-Who-Lived, especially when he was incapable of defending himself. Daphne had given in to that argument, and had told Hermione and Ginny what to expect. The Grey Maiden herself was presumably maintaining her silent vigil at Harry's bedside.

"Good evening to you all," Dumbledore said, his voice amplified by a *Sonorus* Charm. "Another year is at its end...how time flies." Dumbledore managed to sound wistful even though he didn't look as though he believed it. It had undoubtedly been a long year for the aging Headmaster.

"However, of more importance than the Leaving Feast and the awarding of the House Cup are the events that have occurred throughout this school term. Events that have seen several of our students Petrified, one cursed, and two others nearly killed." A hush of whispers broke out at the last, but they were silenced by a stern glare from McGonagall. "I believe that it is best to share some of what we know with you, the student body, and your parents through you."

"First, it is true that there was a Basilisk unleashed upon students this year by the so-called 'Heir of Slytherin.' However, that is about as truthful as most of the rumors circulating the school get."

The entire Hall, with a few exceptions, was now staring at Dumbledore, awestruck, open-mouthed.

"Harry Potter is not the Heir of Slytherin. It is true that he was involved, but it is not true that he did it of his own free will. Mr. Potter is an unfortunate victim, and in many ways a reflection of the weight we have placed upon the shoulders of a twelve-year old orphan."

Ron and a few others scoffed. Hermione sent the idiotic redhead the most fearsome glare she could muster. Snape followed up with one of his own, likely accompanied by a burst of Legilimency, and Ron paled.

“Harry Potter is not responsible for anything that happened to Miss Turpin, Miss Granger, Miss Weasley, Mr. Thomas, Mr. Weasley, Mr. Boot, or Mrs. Norris. Mr. Potter was at the time, possessed by a shade of none other than a sixteen-year old Lord Voldemort, the true blood Heir of Salazar Slytherin.” There were a number of gasps and muffled cries of horror, especially among the younger girls. Hermione ignored them. She thought Dumbledore was doing an excellent job thus far.

“Many wizards and witches, with far more experience than Mr. Potter have been deceived by Lord Voldemort. He is not to be held responsible for any of the terrible events, and I will not tolerate further slander of his name. Mr. Potter was critically wounded around a month ago, and remains unconscious in the Hospital Wing. We have had to place a guard on him to assure no foul play.” He sounded disgusted as he said these words, which were technically true. Whether Daphne had gone there by her own conscience was irrelevant, it accomplished Dumbledore’s intent to make the students ashamed of their behavior. It was like a father disciplining a young child for stealing a wand and performing magic. It was absolutely masterful.

“I also will not tolerate any harassment of Mr. Potter’s friends. They have undergone a traumatic experience, and you have no right to demand answers from them. If they wish, they may share their experiences. Keep my prior warning in mind.”

“And now I call upon a moment of silence for Mr. Potter, who is currently fighting for his life...and his sanity...”

There were more than a few gasps, expressions of disbelief, and strangled cries. Even Ron looked like he’d eaten something that had disagreed with him. *Still*, Hermione thought, *did he have to include that? Now everyone’s going to be all over Harry, expecting him to lose it at any moment next year...if he recovers...*

Hermione was shocked by that last thought. *Not IF, when...*

The rest of the Leaving Feast passed in a haze for Hermione. She paid little attention when Ravenclaw won the House Cup, and the Slytherins were reinstated as Quidditch Champions (Gryffindor’s 420-

200 victory, which had relied more on the skills of the Gryffindor Chasers than McGlaggen's Seeking abilities, had not been nearly enough to make up the deficit). Ginny seemed to be rather out of it as well. Hermione glanced over at Terry Boot and Lisa Turpin as the students began to rise and file out of the Great Hall. They had rather glum expressions on their faces. Hermione hoped it meant that they were worried about Harry.

After a restless night of little sleep, Hermione found Ginny in the library and the two left to make one last trip to see Harry before they left for the summer.

They entered the Hospital Wing, and, as usual, found Daphne in her chair next to Harry's bed, a large red Potions book on her lap, which she was thumbing through absently. Always alert, she greeted them without even looking up. "Hello girls," she said. Her tone was bright, but ever since the Chamber, it had also carried a rather dead, gloomy quality. Nor did her smile reach her eyes, which remained clouded with pain. Hermione wondered if Daphne was suffering nightmares from her actions.

"Hello Daphne," Ginny said quietly, taking a seat on Harry's bed. She absently reached over and touched Harry's forearm, almost a reassuring gesture. Hermione felt the urge to do the same. It was very difficult getting through the day without him.

"I suppose you'll be leaving on the Hogwarts Express at eleven." It wasn't a question. Hermione suddenly felt guilty, something which the sensitive Legilimens picked up on quickly. "Don't feel guilty. Harry wouldn't want you to neglect your families, in your case, Hermione; they haven't seen you for a year."

Hermione nodded at the Grey Maiden's logic. "Well, I guess we came up to say goodbye...is there any change?" she asked hopefully.

Daphne's eyes told her everything she needed to know, but she answered anyway. "No. His mind is healing, and that's a good sign. That doesn't mean he'll come out of this unscathed." She shifted in her chair, and flicked her eyes back and forth between Hermione and Ginny. Hermione felt rather uncomfortable, as if she was being

examined under a microscope. "He'll need you two to help him recover." Ginny gulped, but nodded.

"What's wrong?" Daphne asked. It was accusatory, though there was some concern.

"My parents...I don't know if they'll let me be friends with Harry anymore," Ginny replied, her eyes glistening with tears. "Mum's so damn overprotective of me that she wants me to stay away from him, because he's dangerous."

"I can't deny the last," Daphne admitted. "He's a high profile target, and a very active individual. He has to be..." she trailed off cryptically. "You two have been excellent friends to him; I want you to know that. I hope you'll continue to be so in the future."

"I don't care what my family says," Ginny replied defiantly. "I'll be Harry's friend because I want to be his friend."

Daphne smiled. "Don't anger Molly; she's got quite a temper."

"Harry's like a brother to me," Hermione found herself saying. "I'd never abandon him."

"I know, Hermione," Daphne reassured her. "I didn't doubt you. I'm sorry if that's what it came across as."

There was a long, awkward silence in which Ginny fidgeted with a lock of her hair, Hermione bit her lip and Daphne stared aimlessly out the window.

"When he recovers, what are you going to do?" Ginny asked, breaking the silence.

Daphne shrugged. "It depends on how healed his mind is. If he's sane and stable," she said in a strained voice, obviously concerned about the alternative, "then I'll take him back to Dressler Manor. You two are welcome to come, of course. Tonks will probably be stopping by, though she's reaching the toughest part of Auror School."

"Will you owl us when Harry wakes up?" Hermione asked.

Daphne blinked. "Of course...why wouldn't I?" she asked, frowning.

"I do not doubt that you would. I just want to be there for him."

"Me too," piped up Ginny.

Daphne smiled, her eyes brightening for the first time. Though Hermione could see the tears that were threatening to fall as well. "Thank you."

Hermione checked her watch, but then Daphne asked, "Hermione? Are you planning to tell your parents about what happened this year?"

Hermione shook her head. She'd made up her mind a while ago, and had informed McGonagall that she did not want her parents notified without her consent. Her Head of House had understood. "No. I don't want to risk them forbidding me to go to Hogwarts next year."

Daphne nodded grimly. "Be careful, Hermione," she warned. "Don't get caught in a situation where it all comes crashing down on you."

"We've got to get going," Ginny pointed out. Daphne got up from her chair, and proceeded to give each of them a tight hug.

"Take care of yourselves. You'll know as soon as he's lucid." Hermione ignored what Daphne was implying by her word choice.

"Goodbye Daphne," the two said together.

Daphne smiled. "Goodbye girls. I hope to see you *very* soon."

Hermione put an arm around Ginny's shoulders, and they turned to leave. They hadn't gotten six steps away when Daphne called out, "Ginny!"

The redhead twisted her way out of Hermione's arms and turned to look at Harry's guardian. "Yes?"

"Thank you for saving my life," Daphne said quietly. Ginny blinked.

"What?"

"You don't remember?" Daphne asked.

Ginny frowned. "I thought it was just a dream. I think I used a Striking Curse."

Daphne nodded. "You did. It hit Riddle on the back, and prevented him from completing the incantation." Ginny turned white as a sheet. It was obvious what Daphne meant.

"You're welcome..." she whispered, her eyes wide.

"Be proud of yourself, Ginny. Even in all that pain, with your life and magic slipping away from you, you still fought him. And you saved everything."

"I guess I did..." Ginny replied in a vacant-sounding voice. "Wow..."

Daphne laughed, but it didn't last. After another long, awkward silence, Hermione took Ginny's hand in hers, and squeezed gently. "C'mon Ginny..."

Then redhead relaxed, and this time allowed Hermione to wrap her arm around her shoulders.

With one last sad look at Harry and Daphne, the two friends, tears glistening in both of their eyes, began the long journey home.

A/N:AND SHE'S DONE! WOHOOO!

So ends Book 2 of this massive thing that has really exceeded most of my expectations. I hoped to change the books, not rewrite them, but the latter has been much more fun.

One note about the Muggle techonology I mention: I think that only the most pampered purebloods are completely ignorant. Snape's father was Muggle, so its likely he knows what a bomb is. Since Arthur Weasley deals with Muggle objects on an everyday basis, I'm assuming that Ron at least knows that bombs are not good things. Obviously, Hermione knows about everything Muggle. Harry does too, from living in close contact with Muggles at a young age.

Well, I've already started the prologue of SoD, so I'm not going to keep you waiting. I'm having too much fun with this story.

That said, the more reviews of substance that I get, the more motivated I am to write. Just to give you an idea, a few major plot changes for SoD were proposed by *readers*. I do listen to what you have to say.

As for SoD, a summary is up on my profile now. Remus will play a major role, and a number of chracters from 5 and 6 will make an early appearance.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!